

The Jagged Edge of Her Heart

by Barbara G. Caceres

All I ever knew of my grandmother was her name, a southern, old-fashioned name that was once used in a rap song. Ola Mae had four children by the time she was twenty, two boys and two girls. The youngest was my mom, Maggie. In 1931 when Ola Mae was just fifteen, she married Sherman Taylor, a good-looking, hard-working young man with soldier straight posture. At five feet four Ola Mae stood two inches taller than her husband. Their children inherited her thick, coal black hair, high cheekbones, and piercing blue eyes.

They lived in McNairy County, a rural farming community in West Tennessee but moved to Peoria, Illinois when the children were no longer babies. Sherman went to work in the construction trades as a welder and Ola Mae went to work planning her eventual escape. I don't know if the plan to leave was born of a sudden catalytic event or if it slowly worked its way into her thoughts a little each day. When Ola Mae left, she took nothing with her, leaving behind little parts of herself in each room of the house. Her embroidered cheesecloth and ruffled apron still hung near the kitchen sink, a canister of lilac scented powder remained on a narrow shelf above the toilet, and a dozen photos of Ola Mae with Sherman and the kids at different ages sat collecting dust on the old oak side table in the living room. Ola Mae shed the skin of her old life, her old self, emerging as a whole new person, someone unburdened by family responsibilities, free to come and go when and wherever she wanted.

She ended up in San Diego, California where she told everyone she met that she was single and twenty-eight even though she was married, close to forty and the mother of four children. I never judged Ola Mae or felt any ill will toward her and my mom never said an unkind word about her. Even now she is just a name and nothing more. A blurry

image in a black and white photo; an empty page, blank slate, a void, a mystery, a whole book of unanswered questions. But to my mom and her siblings, Ola Mae was a pebble thrown onto a lake. disappearing quietly from the surface of their lives but remaining lodged and unseen in the mud and crevices of each child's broken heart.

Sherman took his teenaged children back to West Tennessee. If anyone asked about Ola Mae, he'd say without hesitation, "I'll kill the bitch if I ever see her." Sherman needed the warm comfort of the small town where he was born and raised, where family and friends provided a soft place to land, an emotional safety net. But my mother, Maggie, saw Ola Mae in this every shadow the town cast. Constantly confronted with her mother's absence, she began to nurture a bitter hatred for her birthplace, believing it was the driving force in her mother's departure and that leaving Tennessee for Illinois was only a baby step in the giant leap her mother had sought. If Maggie could feel the same unsettled, festering desires that Ola Mae had felt, would she then understand why her mother left?

My mother wanted out of Tennessee and when my father came along, she saw exit signs. Paul Johns was a cook in the Navy. He grew up on the Wilson Plantation in Arkansas. The son of day workers, he was uneducated and lacking ambition. My father's greatest asset was his sense of humor and a job that would take him places—places far, far away from West Tennessee. Paul married Maggie in 1957. A month later they were hoisting suitcases into the back of dad's '57 Chevy. As they drove along Highway 22, dad would tell stories of his first deployment overseas and mom would listen and laugh, her mind sometimes wandering far away from the conversation, distracted by curiosity about the people and cities they passed through. Smoking and listening to the radio, they'd sing along with Elvis and Hank Williams, stopping in dry dusty towns to eat a burger and share a beer. Headed for California in 1959 my mom was as happy and as beautiful as she'd ever be. A new bride in a pink summer dress, her black hair held in place with a floral scarf and her thoughts full of anticipation. She'd reach for her white vinyl purse, opening the silver button clasp to check the contents—cigarettes, lipstick, a few loose coins, and a post card from Ola Mae—in San Diego.

Ola Mae had been in California for a few years. My dad was scheduled to report for a two-year post at the Naval base in San Diego. Mom and my grandmother would end up working at the same bar, serving cold beer to tired Navy men, filling empty bowls with red pistachio nuts and emptying ashtrays. They behaved more like sisters than mother and daughter. Of course, that fit the role that Ola Mae was creating for herself as a woman ten years younger than she actually was. Ola Mae had met a man named Larry who worked for the Boeing Company. She got pregnant and they were married. Mom was pregnant with me at the same time. Ola Mae gave birth to a boy in January 1961 and I was born a month later on February 23. My mother and grandmother would spend time together, taking care of their new babies, and perhaps growing closer, or so I liked to imagine.

But in reality, Ola Mae had no interest in me, her new grandchild or in her daughter. In a year she would relocate with her husband and son to Seattle where the baby she named Alan would be raised as an only child, never knowing he had a half-sister named Maggie and three other siblings in Tennessee. My mom and dad moved to Norfolk, Virginia where I would become a big sister to two brothers, learn to ride a bike and start first grade. At age six I knew nothing of my grandmother and would not even learn her name until four years later. I would know nothing of Alan for another six years.

In 1969 my parents divorced. Because I had asthma, the doctor suggested to my mother that living in the Pacific Northwest would be beneficial. Moving to Washington State also presented an opportunity for mom to once again plant herself in the same city where Ola Mae was living.

We arrived in Seattle on a cold January night with rain drizzling enough to dampen the spirits but not actually get anyone wet. Mom reached out to Ola Mae via a late-night phone call from a seedy hotel on the airport strip. My grandmother refused to provide any assistance, and mom would not attempt to make contact with Ola Mae again—until tragedy struck. My brother, Jimmy, was hit by a car and killed in 1971. A few months

after the funeral we were sitting in Ola Mae's small living room on a sofa facing a coffee table full of magazines with Ola Mae standing on the other side, looking helplessly at us as if we were refugees from another country. I don't remember any conversation or even the offer of a drink of water. We were there only minutes. As we rose to leave, I saw a shadowy figure in the nearby hallway, a boy my own age with dark hair. He paused to look briefly in our direction before continuing down the hall. That boy was Alan. It would be another thirty-seven years before Alan would learn of his family in Tennessee, of his siblings and nieces and nephews and the growing multitude of Taylors, the descendants of Ola Mae and Sherman.

Mom grew sullen and distant after the death of my brother. She drank frequently and lashed out at me. I avoided her, felt sorry for her but mostly feared her. I learned to recognize subtle differences in her pupils and facial expression and could tell if she had even one drink. When I got pregnant mom stopped drinking for an entire year and we focused on preparing for the arrival of my child. We had a common goal and enjoyed each other's company but by the time my son was four years old mom fell back into her old pattern of drinking and attacking. I moved away and she had only my phone number.

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In November of 2008 I knew mom was dying. She suffered from COPD and had at least one hospitalization every year for the past three or four years. Sometimes I'd rush to her side with a small vase of flowers, but other times I wouldn't go and Leif, mom's boyfriend, would call in the evening with an update on her condition. I felt nothing. Even the image my mind conjured up, with her looking scared and shrunken in the hospital bed, her belly swollen with a big liver from years of drinking, did not sway me to leave the comfort of my life and cross that threshold into hers—even temporarily. But when Leif called the next day speaking slowly into the phone, his words bore a sadness that caught me off guard. In his voice I heard a palpable remorse and I knew he was shouldering the burden of my mother's regret. I'd endured her drunken rages for years but when I decided to take a trip to Tennessee to visit my father, a trip she learned

about after the fact, she was furious and began a campaign of telephone harassment, harassment that included my son, Michael, her only grandson. This harassment lasted for days, creating the final fracture in an already broken and fragile relationship.

“She didn’t mean it,” Leif struggled to say. “I couldn’t stop her or she’d turn on me.” He seemed anxious and spoke quickly as if I might hang up before he finished speaking. I listened, taking a deep breath and breathing out quietly.

“The doctor says she only has half a heart left. How can anyone live with half a heart?” Leif was my mother’s common law husband. An Alaskan Native and alcoholic, who for the past twenty years provided mother with a partner in co-dependency but more recently as mom’s COPD progressed, a companion and caregiver, Leif’s voice cracked as he told me that mom had suffered a minor heart attack during this most recent exacerbation of her illness.

Leif’s pain and need of compassion left me wilted. By nine that night I was on my way to the hospital. My mother was at Harborview Medical Center in ICU holding. It was simply a big room in the basement where the sickest patients waited for someone even sicker upstairs—in the regular ICU—to die. A dozen beds filled the room, six on the left side and six on the right. They were lined up against the wall with the foot of each bed facing another. Each bed had a thin curtain hanging from a metal track in the ceiling, but only momma’s curtain was closed. The people occupying the other beds had tubes taped to their faces, making it impossible to tell which patients were male or female, young or old. I was told to wait while a team of nurses tried to tap mom’s femoral artery for blood. Because of her severe diabetes, the veins in her arms were impossible to access. An East Indian nurse ducked through the curtain, smiling sadly at me and speaking softly, “We sedate her. She is very combative and not allowing us to draw blood.”

I nodded, thinking maybe mom’s combativeness was a good sign. If she could fight with a nurse under these circumstances, then maybe she’d fight to get better. When the medical team finished, the curtain was slowly pulled back and I saw my mom for the first time in nearly a year. She had a breathing tube in her mouth and her whole body shook as a machine forced air into her lungs. A faded bandanna sat high on her forehead

revealing a receding hairline. Somehow her hair loss made me sadder than the big box-like machine that was keeping her alive. I leaned in close to her ear and shouted, "I'm here, momma. It's me, Barbara. Momma, I'm right here!"

The nurse scooted a metal chair in my direction and I sat close to the bed looking at my mother's face. The skin around her eyes was sagging and swollen and her once beautiful eyebrows were sparse and faded. I had a sudden memory of her applying make-up. She called it, 'fixing her face', and as a young girl I was fascinated watching her spit on a cake of Maybelline mascara to wet it, using a small wand to transform her eyebrows into beautiful black arches. Mom was often told she looked like Elizabeth Taylor and even had a mole on the side of her face that she'd darken with the same waxy substance. I didn't know what to say except "I'm here, I'm here momma ..."

The next day after work I met Leif in the hospital lobby. His posture relaxed and he smiled and took my hand. With each step he seemed to unload a bit of pain and I could almost see it falling from his shoulders, like potatoes dropping from a bag and rolling off in every direction. Leif and momma sometimes maintained long stretches of sobriety as they took care of each other, mom doing the cooking and cleaning and Leif keeping track of her doctor appointments and giving her insulin shots. They both loved reading and shopping at thrift stores and their small apartment was filled with stacks of books and eclectic pictures and knickknacks. Momma received disability from the state and Leif an occasional dividend check from the Native Alaskan tribe of his ancestors. As mom got older and her condition worsened, she and Leif settled into an apartment in Columbia City, just south of downtown Seattle and they seemed content.

Leif said he couldn't sleep and had arrived at the hospital early. He'd gained a lot of weight since I'd last seen him and his black hair was cut with bangs straight across his forehead like one of the Three Stooges. I followed him across the lobby floor and into an empty elevator. I noticed his poorly hemmed khaki pants sat too high above his black socks and the canvas of his navy boat shoes was faded and pulling away from the worn rubber soles.

“How’s she doing?” I asked.

Leif smiled nervously and scratched his head, “Oh, she’s much better since they moved her up from the basement. She seems real peaceful.”

I learned that mom was receiving a paralytic agent, medicine that would keep her still and in a medically induced coma of sorts. She still had the breathing tube but her body was not jerking like before and she did look peaceful. After about an hour Leif needed a cigarette and I walked outside with him. Harborview Medical Center sits on a hill above downtown Seattle. The buildings in Pioneer Square below were lit up and sparkling against the dark of a cold November night. We stood across the street near the parking garage entrance and leaned against a cold metal guardrail. Staring off in the distance and lost in our own thoughts, we inhaled the salty air that wafted up from the Puget Sound. A few seagulls cried overhead and below the guardrail we saw cars on Interstate Five with workers speeding home to loved ones and to ordinary evenings of homework and dinner. I watched the smoke from Leif’s cigarette swirl and break apart in the night sky. I looked at his profile and wondered what he must be thinking, “You took real good care of her, Leif.”

I wanted him to know I appreciated all that he did and that I was grateful for his being in mom’s life when I could not. He nodded, staring straight ahead, his chin trembling a bit. Leif squished the butt of his cigarette against the railing and wiped the black residue off with his hand, “Well, I loved her you know.”

And I knew he did. He was furious when the State approved payment for her oxygen but then took it away if she got even a little bit better. He went on to tell me how the same thing happened when a wheelchair was approved. “Poo just laughed when the truck came to take the chair back, ‘There go my legs!’ she said.” Leif’s small hand folded into a fist and he pounded it on the railing, “Fuckin’ Welfare system!”

I spent the next day at mom's bedside, arriving early and walking down the wide and quiet hallway of the ICU floor. The machines at her bedside displayed numbers and graphs of lines that meant nothing to me, marking each minute of her heart and lung function on display in a digital language only nurses and doctors could understand. I sat at the edge of her bed noticing that her feet were once again sticking out from under the flannel hospital sheet. I bought her a pair of fuzzy pink socks and carefully put them on. The nurse said I should talk to her, that she could hear me, and so I did. I told her about the beautiful tree just outside her bedside window that still had its leaves. I told her how blue the sky was and how nice the fall air felt and how she didn't need to worry about Leif because I would help him. I kept talking until another nurse came in, one I hadn't seen before, and hung a plastic bag of something that looked like pureed chicken on the pole above momma's head. The nurse called it nutrition and I knew mom needed it but it made me sad. Like she'd turned a corner and was taking the exit marked, *leaving forever*, instead of the one that said, *slowly coming back*.

Sometimes I just sat in the chair beside her bed without talking and I'd glance up at the clock that hung high on the wall as it ticked away the minutes in military time. I tried not to think of why a clock like that hung behind every bed in the ICU, but I knew it was to mark the time of death. I kept a solitary vigil at momma's bedside. Her grandson would not come to squeeze her hand or kiss her cheek. They were estranged by years of family events and celebrations that mom knew nothing about. Just as I did not know my own grandmother, Ola Mae. I found myself wondering about her as I looked at mom's face. Did they look alike? What was Ola Mae doing today? Would she want to know about mom? My mother's family tree had a bad case of root rot and it had toppled years ago leaving the branches broken and scattered.

The next morning, I awoke suddenly after hearing a knocking at the window. *One- two- three- four*. I sat up wide -awake and looked to where the sound had come from. *One- two-three-four- I-am-O.K.* The curtains were closed and I could tell it was still dark outside. *One, two, three, four. Please-let-me-go.* The clock on the nightstand read 4:19

and I was convinced that momma had passed away. I called the hospital and although momma was still alive, her condition had worsened and she was retaining fluid. I walked to the window, pulled the curtains back and pressed my forehead against the cold glass. I rapped with my knuckles four times: *one-two-three-four-I-am-so-sorry...*

The sight of momma in her hospital bed frightened me, and I could tell by the soft outline of her flesh under the white sheet that her body, so full of fluid, had nearly doubled in size. The fuzzy pink slippers I'd placed on her feet were gone but I understood why as I watched the nurses checking the pulse at her ankles every half hour. I sat silently at momma's bedside that day, too sad and overwhelmed to say a word. The hospital staff filed in on a regular basis to check the machine settings, adjust this button or that, replacing IV bags or putting drops of liquid in her eyes to keep them moist. "She has very pretty blue eyes," a nurse commented, wiping the excess liquid that spilled onto momma's cheeks like tears.

The next day my husband and I drove to Columbia City to pick up Leif, parking the car across the street from the apartment building where he and momma lived. The front doors to the building were large and made of glass and although the lobby was dimly lit, I could see the murky green water of a neglected swimming pool inside. In 1970 the apartments were high-end rentals but over the years the place had fallen into disrepair with the owners finally selling it to the city as low-income housing. After years of paying slumlords outrageous amounts for studios without a fridge or decent plumbing mom and Leif now had an apartment with a kitchen, bedroom, bath, and a living room area that opened to a small concrete patio. And they paid only a third of their income toward rent. Leif appeared in the lobby, hesitated a moment, then pushed through the doors shifting the weight of the backpack he carried from one shoulder to the other. His facial muscles seemed to collapse and pull the skin of his cheeks and eyes and mouth downward. I knew he'd been drinking.

“I-I had some beer.” He announced it like an apology as he hoisted his body into the back seat of the Yukon. Closing his eyes as his mouth tried to form the words his brain searched for, he spoke slow and deliberate, “I-it was just squeezin’ my heart so hard!”

We were going to let her go. Mom had been on life support for a week and her lungs were ravaged by disease. We entered her room in the ICU and Leif moved close to momma’s bedside. I glanced away, focusing on the window and the tree outside that, even in November, stubbornly displayed a canopy of green leaves. Mom was stubborn too, and proud and unafraid and she’d know it was the end of the season, time to let go. I looked at my mother’s exposed feet and the perfect little toenails. Leif had to buy baby clippers to cut them with. He said they were as soft as white tissue paper. The respiratory therapist appeared and quietly explained what would happen as the tube was removed. Nurses came to disconnect the heart monitor and take down the IV bags, and the chaplain arrived to say a prayer. Leif moved in closer and kissed momma on the cheek. The breathing tube was slowly pulled from mom’s lungs, and I watched as the therapist withdrew it, dabbing at spittle that gathered on her lower lip. Mom gasped but seemed unable to exhale and in just a few minutes she was gone. I rushed to her side and shouted, “I love you momma, I do! I do love you!”



Barbara as an infant with her mother

I wanted her to know I was there, to hear my voice as her soul drifted away but I felt panic that she was leaving, that we had not said all that needed saying. Leif was still at momma’s side. He was so calm and intent on gathering the details to be stored in memory as he focused on her mouth, her hair, and her closed eyelids. His hands began to motion in the air and I watched him, feeling embarrassed that he was drunk. He began to sing something about a fisherman and a little girl and then about a red rose bush. He worked his hands like he was pulling in fishing nets and I stood and watched, deciding not to care what anyone might think. His voice rose and I knew it would make momma happy, ‘all

colors bleed to red, asleep on the ocean's bed, drifting in empty seas, for all my days remaining...'

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The weight of it surprised me. I always thought ashes were light and airy, but the average weight of cremated remains is about seven pounds. I held the box on my lap, balancing it on my legs as we drove to Alki Beach. Mom would leave this world weighing no more than she did when coming into it. She loved Alki and I think it represented all that she was back then: full of potential, untamed, and beautiful. We visited the beach frequently in the first few years after moving to Seattle. Alki had been very different in 1969. Lined with ramshackle bungalows, broken concrete breakaway, and trails bordered by blackberry and scotch brush, the Beach was raw and sculptured only by nature. We found a viewpoint at the north end and walked out onto a pier. It was cold, grey, and windy but as we stood looking out at the water, holding the box with mom's ashes, a wonderful thing happened. The sky opened up allowing a bit of sunshine on the water and a patch of blue sky appeared. Glancing across the street to where a tall glass condo stood, I noticed a figure standing in the window and I wondered if this stranger knew what we were about to do. Leif and I carefully opened the box and untied the metal clasp. Together we gently shook the plastic bag and watched as the powdery remains fell into the Puget Sound. With a soft splash, mom's ashes hit the dark water. Immediately a beautiful pale green plume formed just beneath the water's surface. It was translucent and captivating and seemed to be filled with light. We leaned over the pier and watched as the shape responded to the gentle motion of waves, expanding and undulating like some exotic underwater flower. Leif's body shook hard as he tried but failed not to cry. I put my arms around his shoulders and squeezed, crying with him.

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After momma's death, I could not stop thinking of my grandmother. I learned from Leif that he and mom had actually gone to see Ola Mae five years ago. With the help of a skilled librarian and a quick public record search they easily found her address in

Renton, Washington. Ola Mae opened the door and moved them toward the sidewalk where they stood in a circle looking at each other and where Leif said Ola Mae looked at her daughter and asked, 'Why does she look so puny?'

Leif said he smiled and shrugged his shoulders looking down at Ola Mae's feet. It was then that he noticed she was wearing a beautiful gold ankle bracelet. My mom at only four feet 11 inches had not seen her mother in more than twenty20 years. Mom said nothing but smiled up at Ola Mae like a little girl. Five minutes later Leif and mom were walking back towards the bus stop. Leif said it was a strange visit but it seemed to make momma happy and for several days after that she'd talk about the visit, saying how good it was to have seen her mother.

At some point Ola Mae had moved to Enumclaw. I read the information from an Internet search and scribbled her address on a scrap of paper. I tried to put it out of my mind but by the end of the workday I knew I'd have to go see her. I kept thinking of my mom, dead and gone forever and of Ola Mae standing in front of her neat little house wearing a gold ankle bracelet—and not even inviting mom inside! My husband found the house easily, a small yellow rambler on Semanski Street. I felt a flutter of nerves in my stomach. I lifted the metal door-knocker and rapped three times. Hearing movement on the other side I took a deep breath, bracing myself but the door remained closed. The sound came nearer, a dragging, shuffling sound that suddenly stopped. When the door opened a tall, burly man stood before me with dark longish hair and full beard. Although he was big, he was not intimidating and he said hello cautiously and waited for me to respond.

"Is Ola Mae here?" I asked, clasping my hands together nervously.

It was barely a shadow, a second of longing and grief remembered. It passed from his eyes and over his face and caused him to steady himself and hold a little tighter to the cane that helped support his weight. I noticed his foot in a soft cast of sorts and he inched a little closer and said slowly, "She died almost a year and a half ago."

I sighed and looked down, my eyes settling on his injured foot. I felt as if I needed a cane at that moment to support the burden of my own weight. My husband stepped closer, steadying me with his arm around my shoulder and saying quietly, “This is her granddaughter.”

“Are you Alan?” I asked.

He looked perplexed but nodded and waited for me to explain.

“I just wanted to let Ola Mae know that her daughter, Maggie, has died.” I said, keeping my eyes on his, anxious to see his reaction. He looked at me but said nothing. I could see the confusion and surprise.

“You had no idea, did you? I’m so sorry. You didn’t know?”

Alan shook his head slowly. “I knew about a sister in Tennessee but after mom died, I couldn’t find a phone number or address.”

I smiled and quickly told Alan he had two half-brothers and two sisters and he had at least six or seven nieces and nephews. Alan stepped aside and asked if we’d like to come in. We stood in the shadows of Ola Mae’s small living room listening to her son talk about his mother’s bout with Shingles and how she never quite recovered, falling sicker and passing away shortly after. His dad was now in a nursing home with dementia. Alan sighed and shrugged his shoulders. The house and everything in it would have to be sold. I looked around the tiny living room, wanting some clue to the kind of woman Ola Mae was. I saw a bookcase full of knickknacks and noticed a pair of hoot owls made from tiny seashells. I glanced over Alan’s shoulders to the kitchen. A dull yellow light barely illuminated a small table. I imagined me and Ola Mae having coffee there, her patting my hand with her own, leaning in to tell me something about her daughter, *‘Maggie never gave me a moment’s peace. She was feisty, a real spitfire!’*

But I'd come too late and Alan couldn't answer any of my questions. He'd grown up thinking he was an only child. Ola Mae was dead. She'd lived without acknowledging her grandchildren and without restoring any semblance of normalcy in the relationship with her children from her first marriage. Ola Mae took every secret she held to her grave.

We drove away from the small house. I felt burdened and confused. The sky grew dark and the long country road was black and lit only by the occasional headlights of passing cars. The farmlands that were lush and green earlier in the day were now just shadowy voids, sad and depressing in their emptiness.

I called Alan a few weeks later. I asked if Ola Mae liked living in Enumclaw, and he told me she hated it. I knew it looked too much like Tennessee but kept those thoughts to myself. I sent Alan pictures of the brothers and sisters he had never been told about and included all the names, addresses, and phone numbers of his nieces and nephews. I wrote that if he needed anything or wanted to talk, I'd be happy to answer whatever questions I could.

My mother's relationship with her own mother would remain a mystery. Without a defining moment or precipitating event, Ola Mae had disappeared. She was the pebble thrown on a somber lake that still rippled from her actions so many years ago. Those ripples were felt not only by her children, but by the grandchildren she never knew or cared to know. It wasn't so much that she'd left ... a lot of spouses leave ... it was the emotional abandonment that hurt, the lack of contact and disregard. I felt my mother's pain most profoundly one evening while washing dishes. The knowledge came to me as I stood with hands submerged in warm soapy water. My shoulders shook as I began to sob. I felt a deep wail pass my lips as my husband rushed to my side. "She didn't know how!" I cried. "She didn't know how!"

My husband held me tight as I yelled into his shoulder.

“Mom didn’t know how—she didn’t know how to love me!”

My heart would be at low tide for the longest time, all the rough edges exposed and vulnerable. Eventually I’d let the days and weeks roll away, out from under the weight of my sorrow. I’d learn to shake loose the pebbles in my shoes and brush away the gravel on my pillow that kept me awake at night and forever drop the stones that I thought had permanently lodged themselves under my breastbone. On a spring day one year later, I drove to the beach where momma’s ashes had been scattered. The water under the pier lapped hypnotically like a giant dog at its bowl. I stood still, languid and relaxed, mesmerized by the sun’s dance on water and the promise of long, warm days. I stood there until dusk. When the lights of the city across the Puget Sound began to glow, I sighed and took a deep breath. The air was rich with the smell of salt and seaweed. I thought about Alan and wondered why I hadn’t heard from him. I dialed his cell number and listened as the phone rang at least a dozen times. When I thought I’d hear his voice mail message I heard instead, *I’m sorry, the number you’ve reached has been disconnected.*

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