

My Final Christmas with Mom

by Alexandra Loeb

My mother's ashes sat on my sister's mantel in North Carolina, a location of temporary convenience and that in no way fit with my mother's wishes. I needed to scatter her remains in order to gain closure—or maybe even gain a better understanding of our complicated relationship. With four siblings—all now technically orphans—I figured we could grieve and process together. I envisioned a family gathering where we all actually *gathered*. My vision bore no resemblance to the loose band of fiercely independent people that we all are—a group of people that seldom *gather*. Eighteen months after her death, we were still struggling to find the right time and place to scatter her ashes, leaving me untethered.

Sibling conversations had turned frustrating at best, hurtful and full of recriminations at worst.

“Mom moved from the south to San Diego the first chance she had. She was happiest in the Southwest and assumed she'd be scattered there,” my younger sister and I proclaimed.

“Mom should be in North Carolina where most of her kids and grandkids can visit,” the eldest two responded.

“I'll be back in the states three weeks this entire year, so whatever we do, it has to be then,” the middle sibling, who lives in China, added to the mix.

Our judgements were fierce.

“Did you not *know* Mom?”

“Do you not *care* about Mom's wishes?”

“You *don't* understand, you don't have children.”

It devolved from there.

Finally, the elders won and we decided to scatter Mom's remains in Winston Salem, North Carolina, a town with no direct flights to anywhere close to my rural

hometown in British Columbia. “Fine,” I agreed. “I can do any time but Christmas.” The overbooked flights, multi-legged journey, crappy weather all but assured I’d arrive late, missing any ceremony and any hope of a joyful holiday. Yet my siblings decided the family would gather at Christmas, in North Carolina, and I was left to decide if I would join.

Around the time these conversations were swirling, my husband Ethan and I decided to take a road trip to the American Southwest, looking for warmth during a cold, wet Canadian spring. An annual road trip is a bit of a tradition. We take our lab-mix, Bosco, our bikes, hiking boots, and our van, which is mostly a big bed and a camping kitchen.

As we organized our trip, it occurred to me that we were headed to the exact place Mom loved best. This was an unconscious choice, but there was no coincidence in my being pulled to the place filled with my best memories of Mom—the place where she had formed the best memories of *her* life. With my mother’s ashes sitting on my sister’s mantel in North Carolina awaiting action on the “family decision,” they would not be traveling with me. As our departure date got closer, I mulled over alternate ways I could use this trip to find closure.

One soggy afternoon, a few days before we left, I was in the basement on our stationary bike. My legs spun circles as I cycled through feelings of anger and frustration but mostly hurt. Pity is an emotion I work hard to avoid, and I was wallowing in it. *You are not a person to fixate, to have looping thoughts*, I scolded myself as my mind spun faster than my legs. Finally, I yelled out loud, “Come on, Alex. You’re a problem solver. Solve this problem.”

And then it came to me. I didn’t need Mom’s physical remains. Her ashes were far removed from the actual person who was my mother. I just needed something that symbolized her. I mentally catalogued any possession of Mom’s I might have that could serve as a tribute. Not her clunky nut grinder that she used to make chocolate hazelnut tortes on Sunday nights. Not her ancient red Coleman cooler. Not her prized painting of two old men sharing a drink at a table. After I grew tired of spinning in place, I moved to the floor to meditate, which I clearly needed.

Before the chime rang, I opened my eyes: *Christmas. Christmas ornaments*. In my mother’s final apartment, she had very few personal belongings beyond the bare necessities. Mostly just family photos and a few pieces of art. But she had boxes of

Christmas decorations. Even with dementia, Christmas was her holiday, a time she insisted on the family coming together. On my last visit to see Mom, when she clearly was not going to make another Christmas, I returned home with a big box full of decorations.

I uncrossed my legs, ran to the guest room closet, and lugged out the Rubbermaid box. Inside was a treasure trove of trinkets, including a badly bent Mexican straw wreath and dozens of glass bulbs. I pushed aside the fragile and bulky to uncover scores of wooden figures and a few other delights. They were perfect: quintessential Mom in their aesthetic, plentiful enough that I wouldn't miss a few, a clear reminders of our Christmas trees growing up. Selecting a handful that seemed both meaningful and expendable, I packed them carefully into an old cookie tin.

Bell

My mother was an alcoholic. There is no polite way around that fact. She was what I labeled a "social alcoholic," with rules around when and how to drink: After 5 p.m. Preferably with company. Definitely with a bowl of nuts beside her.

And Mom enjoyed a good party, throwing an epic one every New Year's Day with football on several televisions throughout the house, a huge spread of cold cuts in the dining room, and her famous eggnog. Mom skipped the eggnog. Her drink of choice was gin. By the time she moved to her retirement home, each "martini" (really just gin poured over ice) contained six ounces of the stuff. Over the course of an evening, she'd have three of these behemoths.

To state the obvious, this was in no way healthy. But she was amazingly resilient, rarely showing signs of a hangover or an abused liver. The worst was when she combined her favorite hobbies: drinking and driving. "But everyone does it," she told me, referring to the hundreds of retirees in her sprawling complex. I responded by securing her car keys: "All the more reason I'll just wait and have a nightcap when we get home."

Most of my siblings didn't drink with her, which I suspect was the normal and healthy action. But once safely back in her apartment, I rummaged through her liquor cabinet, selecting something I didn't drink at home. I obliged her request for a drinking partner because it was the only time she opened up to me. Often that was painful. She'd

confess her difficulty in loving her children, forgetting to acknowledge that I was one of those offspring. She would show no memory of the conversation in the morning and would repeat the haunting confessions the following night. But she also told me stories that revealed how she became the person she was. I slowly sipped my Cognac while she—outwardly emotionless—told me her sad tales. Like how her mother didn't appreciate her sense of humor or much of anything else about her—she only connected with her father. And most tragic: she told of the time she was in the car with her father, going to pick up her mother at the airport when the driver swerved and my grandfather was thrown out of the car, dying instantly. Mom had to tell her mother, who then blamed Mom for the accident. Mom never cried, barely even blinked while telling these stories. She usually summed them up with some line about how maybe that was why it was so hard for her to love her own children. In no way would she leave an opening for a consoling hug afterwards—a hug that would have served us both. The best I could do was mutter something like, “That must have been hard.” Then, I'd switch my drink to herbal tea, needing all of my remaining faculties to process what I'd heard.

As my husband drove into northern Arizona, I rummaged through the cookie tin filled with decorations and thought of those nights with Mom. We were entering “mom terrain” and I needed a plan. Or at least a next step. My collection of ornaments suddenly seemed random, disjointed. I held up the most fragile item: a glass bell. My practical mind instructed me to find a home for it first—while it was still in one piece. I studied the bell in the light streaming through the windshield. Turning to my husband, I asked, “Doesn't a bell remind you of a party?” He was non-committal. But the idea anchored in my head. As much as drink was an issue for Mom, I still loved the memories of her hosting a party for her friends, buzzing between people, a rare time when she was constantly smiling. And maybe I thought of those evenings in her apartment—her confiding, me sipping my Cognac—as a private party of sorts.

That night we stayed in a campground near a mountain bike trail. Ethan set out for an evening ride while I organized the campsite, slipping our blue flowered tablecloth over the cement picnic table. Lounging with Bosco, I noticed that our view of distant mountains was framed by evergreens. The ravine separating us from the neighboring site was full of

Juniper trees, which produce the berries used to make gin. *Ah-ha*. What's a party without gin? For Mom, it would be a grave disappointment. I scampered over to the trees to find the perfect branch. It was covered in berries and out of sight from other campers. I hung the bell, stepped back, and admired my handiwork.

Homemade Tree

A few days later, I was biking in Sedona with another of Mom's ornaments in my pack. Up until this point, I was having a shitty ride. I felt fat. I was hot, our 9:00 a.m. start too late to beat the heat. I had no flow on my bike. The night before Ethan had declined my request to ride with him, explaining that he didn't want to wait for me in the blazing sun. I interpreted that comment to mean that I sucked and I had lost my riding partner forever.

After showing me to the trailhead, he pointed in the right direction, listing five connected trails I might enjoy, and we went our separate directions. Somewhere on the third trail I was forced to call him. I forgot the order, convinced the trail was an uber technical one he had not recommended. I was wrong. It was apparently an easy trail. The problem was me, not the trail. I got back on my bike, rode a short distance, then spotted a bench, and suddenly wanted to stop again. The bench was in a beautiful shady spot, complete with a view of the red-layered cliffs Sedona, Arizona is famous for. Amidst that beauty I was still unmercifully criticizing myself. But it wasn't only *my* inner voice I heard. My mother could be incredibly judgmental. On that bench I could hear her clearly as well: *Maybe I felt fat because I was fat. It really wasn't that hot—I always was a heat weenie. And my long hair—too long, especially at my age—wasn't helping. As for my lack of confidence in my riding, I was too sensitive. And face it: I was always slow.* Mom had constantly reminded me of when I was fifteen years old and was prescribed running to hold my scoliosis at bay. She'd run with me and tease me relentlessly that at fifty, she was faster than I was. And I shouldn't forget, I was also always a scaredy-cat, needlessly scared of rattlesnakes, mountain lions, bears—and trails that were too hard. On this point she was wrong. Cautious? Yes. But at least I was out there.

As I caught myself arguing with her, trying to convince her of the strong woman that I had become, I reached into my pack. I pulled out one of her ornaments: a flat,

sparkly Christmas tree. In the bright sunlight, it was clearly homemade and tacky, maybe one she made in the dementia care arts and crafts. (I can be judgement as well.) I carefully hung it on the tree shading the bench.

Soon after, Ethan pulled up wearing a big smile, clearly happy to see me. I let go of the argument with my mother's ghost and allowed myself to be thrilled to see him. We rode the rest of the way together to the trailhead. The ride was fast and flowy. My pack was one ornament—and a few judgments—lighter.

Golden Angel with Red Wings

During the months that I wrestled with my siblings, I became more aware that I wanted to honor the woman who happened to be my mother, rather than honoring her role as mother. As her daughter, I would never know the entirety of the person my mother was, but as we drove into New Mexico a week later, I knew I wanted to celebrate what I *did* know.

In her early twenties, Mom lived in Albuquerque with her best friend, Francesca. Outside a few short vignettes, this chapter of her life was a complete mystery to me. But she often referenced them as some of the best years of her life, when she was happiest and felt the freest to be herself.

Later, she moved to New York City to pursue her MBA at New York University where she met my father. By all accounts they were a socially gregarious couple, the life of the party. Within four years they had moved to New Jersey, an hour away, and had three children. Again, by most accounts she was happy. Then, they moved 800 miles south to Georgia to support the expansion of my father's business. My father once said to me, "You remember your mother, right? When she was happy? Before we moved to Georgia?" No, I didn't remember because I was born in Georgia. They moved South while she was pregnant with me and my mother stayed for twenty-four years. From my experiences, it was never her happy place. Maybe her drinking in New Jersey was festive, but in Georgia it was melancholy. Sober or not, she had resting frown face. She confessed to me later she found the southeast suffocating.

Our first stop in New Mexico was Albuquerque. A hot, busy town with a wild mix of ugly strip malls, beautiful petroglyph monuments, sprawling ranches, and a bustling Old Town. After lunch at a trendy converted warehouse filled with bars and restaurants, we walked to Old Town searching for a good spot to enact my new ritual. The last time I was here with Mom she wanted to visit a church, although I couldn't remember the exact one. My mother's religiousness was a mystery to me. She was a selective but devoted Catholic. Her church attendance was straightforward, but she didn't discuss her faith. She promoted birth control, never blinked about premarital or homosexual sex, but she also tithed regularly, abstained from meat on Fridays during Lent, and infrequently missed Mass. I don't recall ever seeing her with a rosary. I have no idea if she prayed to Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or simply God. Walking the narrow streets of Old Town, I googled "old churches." There was one just across from the plaza. The San Felipe de Neri Church was clearly not the one I had visited with Mom years ago, but it was quaint and one of the oldest in the city. In front was a small garden with roses surrounding the Virgin Mary. I took a moment to admire the courtyard. And then, when no one was looking, I tucked Mom's golden wooden angel with red wings deep into the rose bush. It seemed the perfect place to honor the mystery of Mom.

Red Giraffe with Yellow Ears

My visits with Mom were three days long. Fewer, and it didn't count as a full visit. Longer and Mom would say, "Company is like bread, after three days they get stale." Vacations together were no exceptions, but in those three days Mom and I had fun in ways we hardly ever experienced in her home. The change of scenery helped with the conversation—instead of the normal dour drunken conversations, we could gossip about other tourists, plan where to eat, browse shops. We traveled to San Francisco, Coronado, Santa Catalina Island, Vegas, Zion. But my favorite was Sante Fe. Watching Mom eat spicy chili rellenos, sweat dripping off her brow, washing it down with a margarita seemed celebratory rather than moribund.

Mom and I visited Canyon Road in Sante Fe multiple times. She loved the street, a half mile dedicated to some of the country's finest art. I still treasure the two square blue

terra cotta platters she bought for me there years ago. I always felt close to Mom in Santa Fe. I'd catch glimpses of the fun gal I never really knew, yet who felt closer to me than the mother I grew up with. She seemed lighter, younger, happier. Now that I was in Santa Fe again, I felt more convinced than ever that it would be a betrayal if we were to leave her ashes in North Carolina where she had felt suffocated, surrounded by people she didn't bond with. Before she succumbed to dementia, I had asked her where she wanted to be scattered after she died. "Somewhere warm and dry," she said. I interpreted that to mean the desert of the Southwest.

It was a cold morning as I bundled up for my Canyon Road walk. Mom's sense of art was sometimes refined, fairly traditional, and objectively beautiful. Other times it was a bit kitschy. I stuffed a decoration in my jacket pocket that was a prime example of the latter: a red giraffe with white dots on its neck and big yellow ears. This giraffe had no hanger, so after walking the length of Canyon Road scouting for a prime location, I nestled it deep in ivy across from a gallery that she would have enjoyed browsing. That night at dinner, I told a local person at the table next to us about my project. He assured me that the people of Santa Fe would recognize and respect these as totems and leave them in place.

Pink Cherub with Broken Wings

The next day, I visited the Indigenous jewelry makers in front of the Palace of the Governors, remembering the times that Mom and I had walked this row of incredible artisans, admiring their work and discussing what we might buy as presents for other family members. On this visit I bought a beautiful silver bracelet for myself and one for Ethan. Content with my purchases, Bosco and I crossed the street and settled on a bench in the center of Santa Fe Plaza.

There, a couple was playing a bass and a banjo. No fan of music, Mom would have tolerated the spot for the collection of humans they attracted, especially the three-year-old boy enthusiastically dancing along. Bosco and I absorbed the energy of the place. He settled on the ledge with a constant stream of people approaching us to pet his soft fur. Mom was also no fan of dogs. But the people he attracted helped me initiate

conversations similar to the ones Mom would have struck up. She would have had asked these strangers questions, inquired about their lives, their jobs, their children, and listen to their answers with a full attention she scarcely ever did with her kids.

I had brought along Mom's pink cherub playing the guitar. The wings had broken off years before, with just a spot of glue left on the back. Given its guitar, I decided it belonged among the sounds of the plaza. In a moment when onlookers were distracted by the music, I reached into my purse and stealthily hung it on a bush behind me. With no wings, the cherub couldn't fly away. It reminded me of how, when I would visit Mom in San Diego late in her life when she had limited mobility, I would set her up on a bench while I'd go off for a run or a long beach walk. One of Mom's favorite harmless hobbies was to people watch. She invariably claimed she was happy, and I should take as long as I wanted. Relieved of the pressure of making conversation with a woman who rarely seemed interested in what I had to say, I took full advantage of the opportunity to escape for an hour. When I'd return a book would sit unopened beside her and she'd be watching the passersby from beneath her straw hat, mesmerized by their behaviors and imagined lives. I wondered now if it was the anonymity that allowed her to be free and open to them in a way she struggled to be with her children.

Guard in Sentry Box

Mom loved to ski. She'd hunch over slightly, and slowly but confidently, carve big S-turns down a blue groomed run. Her last run was in Park City, Utah where she owned a timeshare. She left the slopes in a sled that day, her knee busted, leaving the surgeons to glue her back together. As she recalled that event, her memory was only of enjoying skiing, happy she had given it all she had.

In the last years of her life, when I visited Mom in Memory Care, we'd flip through old photo albums. In those pictures was a woman I didn't know at all. It was one thing to not know Albuquerque mom. I wasn't even born yet. But these photos were taken when I was an adult. There were photos of her and her friends dressed up in silly outfits as they readied to go skiing. They posed for the camera in flirtatious, hilarious positions. What struck me most was that the photos were almost identical to ones I have taken with my

friends. Goofy, fun. In her pictures and my own, the people were often caught mid-laughter. Mom didn't know that side of me either: silly with abandon, no fear of judgment. In dementia care these were the only photos where she could remember all of the people's names. They consistently made her smile.

My last ornament was a guard in a sentry box, like the guards outside of Buckingham palace. If I stretched my imagination, I thought it could be a skier getting on a lift. As I wrapped up my road trip, my plan was to leave this ornament in Park City. Broken into two pieces, I bought some super glue at a fuel stop along our route and repaired it. But a late spring snowstorm forced a change in plans. After almost four weeks on the road, I was content with my ritual, ready to go home, not willing to risk icy roads for one last ornament placement.

We drove into Salt Lake City traffic. Squished between tractor trailer trucks, it occurred to me that I put all of the decorations in places surrounded by needles and thorns or tucked deep out of reach, which now seemed fitting. Mom was prickly and protected her emotions. The first time I remember her telling me she loved me, I was in my early twenties. I hugged her, one of the most awkward hugs of my life. It wasn't until she was fully into dementia that she was able to blow me a kiss at the end of a call and tell me she loved me. It was then, in her senility-induced free expression of love that I realized how much I craved my mother's affection. Sad for what I had missed, I greedily accepted all the blown kisses she had to offer. By the time she passed away, it had begun to almost feel natural.

The sentry was alone in the cookie tin as we approached our small Canadian town. My mother didn't understand the appeal of my town, nor did she ever visit. She never skied at our local resort, which I have enjoyed with my girlfriends in much the same way my mother enjoyed her ski trips with friends. As Ethan and I drove up the steep hill to our mountain home, I caught a glimpse of the snowless ski runs and knew what I needed to do. This winter, when snow returned, I would place the last ornament among the trees that line the slopes. At our local ski area, the best blue runs are in an area called Paradise, my favorite named Southern Comfort, an irony I am fine with.



Alex Loeb writes, loves, and plays in Rossland, British Columbia. Her short stories and nonfiction essays have appeared in *The Sun*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Cleaning up Glitter*, *The Write Launch*, *HerStry*, and *Jelly Bucket*. She is currently querying her debut novel.