

# Writing through Story: The Death of my Mother

**Deanna MacNeil**

## **Abstract**

I will write you a magic story, a world with no tubes and no pain. Little Dee will get in bed beside you and feed you all the squares. All the squares you want, Mom. I'll sing you all your favourite songs and write them all for you. Thank you for loving me just as you did. For being just as you are. I am who I am because of you. I love you. I will miss you and miss telling you all the stories. You would say my name just so: "Deeeaaanna". Who will say my name as you did, to let me know I'm living my best life? I'll do my best to continue Mom, and hope to hear you say my name just as you did, just as you know.

## **Keywords**

loss, love, kinship, grief

## From Toronto, Ontario to Halifax, Nova Scotia

On the morning of February 14, 2020, I received an unexpected voice message from a family member requesting I call back. I was hesitant to return the call, imagining scenarios I had no control over. Selfishly, I worried I would receive information that would disrupt my day.

I returned the call to learn my mother was bleeding from the back of her head.

My Mom, her husband, and much of our family live in Nova Scotia. When I got the call about my Mom, I was in Toronto, where I am currently doing my Ph.D. at York University.

I could not understand what happened to my Mom.

I did not know what to do.

I had plans with someone that night. It was Valentine's day and he had booked us dinner at an Indian restaurant in Yorkville. He and I had been dating for 2 months. I called and let him know, to the best of my ability, what was going on. He said he would book two flights from Toronto to Nova Scotia, for that afternoon. I asked him because I was not certain I heard correctly: "Two tickets"?

That's right. He was coming with me.

I could barely pack my clothing. After talking with Roy, my Mom's husband, things made more sense. Though Roy never said it out loud to me, I understood I was going home for a funeral. That helped me pack. Lots of black clothing, I own lots of black clothing because I worked in makeup and that was our uniform. Pack that, Deanna. Pack your black clothing.

I could feel myself sweating. I was off-balance.

What would I do with my dog Goldie? Who could I call? Thankfully, I made some new reliable friends that I trusted. They were quick to help and agreed to take Goldie immediately. Then I called another friend who is like family, who agreed to take Goldie a few days after.

I ticked off the boxes. I was not sure how long I would be away.

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My Mom had a brain hemorrhage on February 14, 2020.

Roy, my mother's husband, tells the story like this: Mom and Roy were up first thing in the morning. Roy was getting ready for work. The grandkids were getting ready for Mom to drive them to school. Mom needed to use the washroom, but Roy was in there. When Roy was done, he went into the living room and found Mom sitting on the sofa holding the back of her head. She started screaming. She was struggling to keep her head up. She began to throw up. Mom said to Roy: "I think I'm dying." Roy asked Mom if he should call an ambulance. She said no. Roy called 911, the paramedics came. Mom was emergency airlifted from Sydney, N.S. to Halifax, N.S. for medical care.

Arriving at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Halifax, we learned Mom's surgery went better than expected. Now, to wait.

There was unexpected hope; we thought things might turn around.

They did not.

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Mom died on February 19, 2020, surrounded by us, her family.

I thought I could remain bedside with my mother, holding her hand as she left us. I wanted to be strong for her, to give her comfort. That's where I started, but I could not stay. Things got scary when the nurse took the tubes out of Mom's nose and mouth. I went back to my partner and held on.

When Mom took her last breath and her heart took its last beat, I felt my parts rise in grief,<sup>1</sup> with the cries of my baby sister, and the sobs of those around us. Mom's sweet hands made strong fists and snuggled up to her cheek. Goodbye, my dear, sweet mother.

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<sup>1</sup> I take a form of psychotherapy called Internal Family Systems. I learn about various parts that have come up from my childhood in protection of me. The parts aid in survival of the self when dealing with trauma. With a few years of therapy now, I have visualized, identified, named, and conversed with my parts. Holding gratitude for their efforts, understanding their intentions, while

being grounded in a calm, collective, confident self, can aid in healing with the parts, working in awareness and collaboration. One of my most infamous and tenacious parts, Morgan, was there, with Little Dee (the exile-who needed all the support she could get), Control – the academic, The Crow of Sadness, and the Cat of Rage.



Fig. 1 Mom, myself, and Roy at their wedding reception.

February 19, 2020

Facebook post, the Death of my Mother:

I will write you a magic story, a world with no tubes and no pain. Little Dee will get in bed beside you and feed you all the squares.<sup>2</sup> All the squares you want, Mom. I'll sing you all your favorite songs and write them all for you. Thank you for loving me just as you did. For being just as you are. I am who I am because of you. I love you. I will miss you and miss telling you all the stories. You would say my name just so: "Deeeaaanna". Who will say my name as you did, to let me know I'm living my best life? I'll do my best to continue Mom, and hope to hear you say my name just as you did, just as you know.

## From Halifax, Nova Scotia to Sydney, Nova Scotia

Do you recognize those moments in life where something bigger than the human species seems to hear, feel, and see us? Here is another story: Close family members gathered at the funeral home to say goodbye to my mother. As I stood alone at the casket, silently saying goodbye, I heard crows cawing in the distance. Though I was saying goodbye to the physical, material existence of my mother, I knew there was something bigger

<sup>2</sup> Squares are a type of sweet, basically they are homemade cookies/treats that my Mom loved to bake, share, and eat. There were many times I'd come home late from my nights out in Toronto and call my Mom in Nova

surrounding me, my Mom, our love, and the loss I was grieving.

I walked away from the casket towards my partner. When I was close enough that I could whisper in his ear, I asked if he had heard the crows. He did not, though it did not lessen the moment I shared with my mother.

It was time to go. Leaving the funeral home meant saying goodbye to my mother in her physical form. It was time to drive to the cemetery.

As we stepped into the hallway to leave, I saw Roy standing close to the exit. As I asked Roy out loud what I had whispered to my partner, the front doors were opened. The cries of the crows were louder. My mouth dropped open.

February 25, 2020

Facebook, and Twitter post, leaving the funeral home:

I heard the crows cawing softly as I said goodbye to my mother. Leaving the funeral home, they cawed loudly. I saw them in the trees and the leader waited, perched on a light post.



Fig. 2 Crows in trees and on a lamppost at the funeral home.

Scotia. Most often, Mom was up after being in bed for some time, helping herself to some squares. She would answer the phone, I would tell her about my night, and we would chat.

## Return to Toronto, Ontario, and COVID-19

May 5, 2020

Facebook post, my birthday (edited):

I used to drive my Mom crazy with my singing. I would sing for hours on end. One Christmas she bought me a karaoke machine! I couldn't believe it! I had a microphone that reverbed my voice loudly through the speakers, like a real singer! I'd sing to the karaoke tapes of all my favourite songs. My bedroom ladder with bunk beds made my fantasy stage: I sang to a grand audience.

One day, singing in front of a real audience, Mom came up to me, at the end of the song, with tears in her eyes, and said, "that was perfect."

It meant so much to me. I always wanted to please my Mom.

After a recent therapy session, I wanted to hear the song I sang that day. The lyrics to Madonna's "Oh Father" (1989) told another story, listening again, after all these years: I empathized with my mother. Like the lyrics to the song, my mother was devoted to her father, despite their relationship having tumultuous times. When "Cranky Frankie", my mother's father, had a stroke and ended up in medical care for the last years of his life, Mom visited him every weekend. She brought us, her children, with her.



Fig. 3 Dad and Mom when they were young. Papa, my Mom's father, in the background.

Papa did not have an easy personality, even before the stroke. After the stroke though, Papa was more difficult to be around. There was a weekend we visited; he was especially cruel. Cranky Frankie wheeled toward us as we exited the building to go, yelling at my mother to never come back. I know it hurt Mom because she cried and said she would not go back, though she did return. She visited Papa again soon, even after that. Mom loved with fierce loyalty.

May 5, 2020

Instagram post, my birthday (edited):

I was excited when my nephew gave this photo to me. Back home in Nova Scotia, when Mom was sick and then dying, the want to snuggle her preoccupied my mind. I fantasized about getting in bed with her at the hospital; to be close and bring her comfort. Physical affection for me has been a growth process, and with Mom, most special.

To know that we grew together, to snuggle as we did in this picture, as people that struggled with emotional and physical intimacy, on our own, and with each other, makes our relationship that much more special.

I remember now, the night the picture was taken. Mom and Roy were visiting me in Toronto. The guitar player from the band I sang with came over. He played guitar, I sang songs, for Mom.

Having this picture reminds me of how close Mom and I had become, how the fantasies I had when she was dying, were our actual reality. Not just on this occasion, but others too.



Fig. 4 Myself, Mom, and Roy snuggling.

Sometimes we forget, in our grief, what we had, because what we want, that which was good, we wish to stay. Maybe, though, the loss hurts too much to remember, those good times that were real. I wonder, if the fantasies I had, as Mom was dying, were my unconscious reaching out to me, and her, in the ways we grew, in love and safety, finally, with ourselves -- and each other.

Mom, we snuggled, and I sang to you. God, I miss you, I miss you still.

I got to feeling again, like numerous other times since my mother died, and during COVID, that maybe things within academia and life, are not all they are cracked up to be. I wondered about the point of it all. If any of it mattered. My mentor reached out to me, unexpectedly, with a writing project. He asked if I was interested in telling a story, about our experience in a classroom, about 13 years ago. I wrote this post, and shared it on Facebook, in response.

July 16, 2020

Facebook post, Deanna MacNeil is with Sean O'Handley (Roy's son) and Daniel MacNeil (my brother).

Sometimes, something, someone, reaches out to you, reminding you why you do what you do. Solidifying the need for hope, in people, and what you've chosen and worked so hard for, in life, with meaning and purpose.

I've had the roughest couple of months. I know we all have.

For me, continuing my Ph.D. but with teaching mostly, I've been able to get up, most mornings, with eager anticipation, because students seemed to need me, and I need them too.

Losing my mother, before, during, and approaching the changes of the shifting pandemic, I've done my best to sit with my grief and loss. And I won't apologize for it.

Losing my mother came much too swiftly, shocking me with what I thought was invincible strength -- because I've lost too many of those I've loved.

You may think because you've lost so many that you will be OK losing another. This is not true. Love is multiplicitious and we cannot pin grief down with meaning or purpose. Grief makes you question meaning and purpose; the very things that help you get out of bed in the morning. \*This is why I want to teach, to learn, to hear and tell stories\*

Yet, with the difficulties I've faced, the frustration and anger at the injustice, but also with the loss of my main, familiar, last living person, Mom, having my back, being gone, (DON'T hurt my daughter or you will hear from me-the wonderful wrath of my Mother) I've recognized, it's time for me to heal, Little Dee. I got you, grrrl.



Fig. 5 Daniel, Deanna (me-Little Dee) and Sean (Roy's son, who, like me, is adopted) on my birthday.

## The Afterlife

Below is a blog post I shared on Facebook. After sharing my writing, extended relatives reached out to me with stories of my Mom, family, and their connections with adoption. I did not write and share for a response, though hearing stories from relatives was exactly what I needed.

When life feels meaningless, sometimes we can keep living through the telling and sharing of stories.

May 7, 2020

Deeanna Danger's Blog: The Meaning of Family.

I've been posting lots about my Mom lately. She suffered a severe stroke on February 14, 2020. Mom was emergency airlifted by helicopter from Sydney, N.S. to Halifax for medical care. I flew from Toronto to Halifax with my partner to be with Mom and my family. Things did not go as we hoped. Mom died on February 19, 2020, surrounded by family. I flooded my Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter with words from me for her.



Fig. 6 Mom's memorial picture.



Fig. 7 Roy in a baseball hat.

I'm also writing to express my gratitude to Roy, my mother's husband, for being the best father / father figure / friend to me.

My birthday was on May 5, just a few months after Mom died. Roy called and I couldn't answer the phone. I wasn't sure I could talk without crying; that the words wouldn't come out and I would make him sad. I don't want Roy to be sad. I wanted and want to be strong for him. Yet, I felt like a child. I told all my stories to Mom. The absence of her voice was too much to bear. Mom called me every year on my birthday. I'd answer the phone, and she'd break into song, singing every word of "Happy Birthday". This year, I dreaded my birthday, because I knew I would not hear her voice or have her sing to me. I miss our chats, the way she said my name and sang songs.

My father died when I was 11. When Dad died, I needed to be strong for Mom. She took my father's death hard. Relatives had to help her walk at the wake and funeral. Her brothers were on each side of her, their arms wrapped through hers, holding her body up. Mom's voice, however, did not fail her: "Danny!!... Danny!!" She screamed his name repeatedly. I don't remember crying then. I only remember Mom and the pain she was going through.



Fig. 8 My brother Daniel, me as a baby, and Dad, my Mom's first husband.



Fig. 9 Dad at Christmas when he was sick.

After Dad's death, Mom got a job at the local junior high school cafeteria. She had four children to raise, and all on her own. I suppose the toll was too much to bear; she grieved for years. Christmas was awful. So was Easter. A trip to the graveyard accompanied our holidays, with Mom mourning Dad.



Fig. 10 Mom at her job in the cafeteria.

When I reached adolescence, Mom must have noticed something in me that needed her uplifting words. Those words were only for me. She used to say; "Deanna, you can do anything a man can do. You don't need a man. Look at me, I raised four kids on my own and you all turned out just fine." I took those words with me to my undergrad in women's studies, and then my Ph.D. in Gender, Feminism, and Women's Studies.

With the loss of my mother, I have reflected on previous losses too, like the loss of my father. Dad and I were very close. He welcomed me into his masculine-adult world. I helped him in his auto body shop. We went on adventures to the dump and the liquor store. I loved getting my hair cut with him at the barbershop. When I reached high school graduation, I was anxious. Dad would not be there. There was a father-daughter dance, and I didn't have a father to dance with. I worried I would cry during the dance. A few other students and I fought to have the name of the dance changed. The name required equity. Some of us did not have "fathers" to dance with.

Roy was my dance partner that night. I shed no tears. Roy had me laughing the whole time. He has always been there for me, for family. Roy is one of the most dedicated, kind, grounded people I know.



Fig. 11 Roy and I at my graduation, first dance.

In my 20s, while living in Toronto, I sent Roy a Father's Day card. I felt a strange hesitance mixed with love because the card said "Dad" on it. I struggled with the word "Dad" but wanted to let Roy know he was a "Dad" to me.

I had a nightmare after I mailed the card. My Dad, Danny, joined me in a dream; he told me he was my father, Roy was not. I wondered if I was an ungrateful daughter to call Roy "Dad"? Was Danny, my Dad, upset with me? I love Roy but was not sure how to navigate Father's Day. Navigating normative family functions and constructs have always been difficult for me, probably exacerbated by being adopted and growing up with sisters who are biologically related to each other and our parents. My nightmare, and the guilt-ridden feelings of confusion, felt significant though.

Looking back, with what I know now, my feelings were bound with the struggle to understand my place in family. Family is multiple and shifting, created, and non-normative. Both Roy and Dad are my fathers. Roy's children are also my siblings. My biological relatives, who I have not talked about here, are family too.



Fig 13 My sister Jennifer, me, and Michelle (aka Belle-Belle, Roy's daughter, also adopted).

Contemplating how I think differently about family, I find it interesting how people fixate on biological similarities. Roy's daughter Michelle is also adopted. Growing up so close and sharing so much time together, adults often commented on how alike Michelle and I looked. At my mother's wake, a few people wanted to know how all of us in the receiving line were related. Specifically, questions asked who is adopted, biologically related, and the children of Danny (Dad) and Cecilia (Mom) versus Roy (Stepdad) and Valerie (Roy's first wife). Someone even asked, "why do you all look so different?" I responded, "look at Michelle and I, and her daughter too, we look so much alike!"

Presently, I enjoy having a multitude of mothers, fathers, and family members. My existence subverts societal constructions of the heteronormative-nuclear, biological-essentialist "family". The roles and rules of normative families do not apply to me.



Fig. 12 Roy smiling in the kitchen wearing oven mitts.





Fig. 14 Daniel and I as youngsters. Though adopted from different families, we look alike.

Being adopted and existing outside typical family scripts, I can say who I think I look like or who I act like in my family, but really, I sound silly because we are not biologically related, yet we kind of pretend we are. When I mention who I think I look like outside family relations, I barely get a response, and if I do, it is rare someone understands me. I am trying to point out unquestioned norms that most take for granted. The assumption is that families are biologically related; there's not much room for imagining in between biology and adoption, unless you're an adoptee like me, or my older brother, Daniel.



Fig. 15 Daniel and I watching music videos.

Daniel helped me create an identity based on imagination. In our worlds of play, Daniel and I could be whoever we dreamed ourselves to be. Growing up adopted, “facts” of our adoptions were not discussed. Our parents did not know where we came from, who our biological parents were, or why we were given up for adoption. They knew the bare minimum. Back then, we did not talk about adoption like we do now. With societal insistence on biological sameness, Daniel and I belonged through our difference. We utilized fantasy. Barbara Streisand was Daniel's birth mother, Madonna was mine. Daniel and I imagined who we could be making connections through song, music video, film, and soap operas.

Roy's first wife Valerie and I also had a special relationship. Valerie died from complications from diabetes. You couldn't meet a more sensitive, giving, wearing-her-heart-on-her-sleeve person than Valerie. We watched all the sad shows together. Roy and Mom would come into the TV room laughing at me and Valerie bawling our eyes out to Highway to Heaven.



Fig.16 Valerie, myself, and Daniel.

I am not sure how Roy gained the strength to be without Valerie. Like Mom, he too had to raise children, and all on his own. Roy and his family were there for us when Dad died. We were there for Roy and his family when Valerie died. We did not give a second thought to the closeness of our relationships or the “fact” that we were not biologically related. We were just there for each other.

Mom and Roy got married a few years after Valerie died. Making our relationships formal, felt right, though we never needed legality to make us family.

Family is more than a biological connection and/or formal or informal adoption. Family is what we make of it; those that care and are there for us no matter what. These are the people that welcomed me into their worlds, and families too. I cherish these connections.



Fig. 17 Mom and Roy laughing.



Fig.18 Roy and Mom: a happy wedding photo.

## **B-Side: Fur Family**

Remember when Alanis Morissette had that secret song at the end of *Jagged Little Pill*? Well, keep reading if you like B-sides. That is how I envision these next few pages.

Whiskey was my best friend throughout childhood and adolescence. She was a captive audience when I would sing. She would lay close to the speaker of the karaoke machine Mom bought me, her ears listening, her eyes watching me.

Every morning, just a few minutes before my alarm went off for work or school, Whiskey would wake me with kisses.



Fig. 19 Our family dog Whiskey.  
The very best girl.

The loss of Whiskey is a story I barely tell. Even though I have discussed Whiskey’s death in therapy a few times, it is hard to go back and revisit that family trauma.

Sometimes people talk about times in life they wish they could go back to, in fantastical hopes of changing their actions, based on what they now know. I do not regret much in life, however, if I could go back in time, it would be the day Whiskey died.

If only I was more aware of what would happen that day. If only I could have believed my girl would be gone, and in a way that was too unjust for the gift she was, for me, for all of us.

Frog, the Boston Terrier in this picture, wants some of Mom's square. Frog's formal name is Coffee. He died a few years ago.

When Frog was getting older, my partner and I at the time, adopted a rescue dog named Goldie. He is the yellow dog in the photo.

Goldie was a comfort to me during Frog's senior years.



Fig. 20 Mom, Frog, and Goldie.

One-night, when Frog could not stop panting and pacing, a side effect of the drugs he needed to limit his seizures, Goldie helped me.

When it was time for sleep, Goldie laid lengthwise across the bedroom door. He had never done this before. Goldie seemed to know that blocking the doorway could protect Frog from wandering into the living room. Frog's seizures needed to be monitored, and his absence from us could be a danger to him. Frog needed to remain close, I think Goldie knew this, and blocked the doorway to give us warning should Frog try to leave.

Another rough night, Frog took a while to settle down. When Frog finally went into his crate, a space I knew that was safe for him should he have a seizure, I sat on the floor looking at him. I had finally realized the wear that age had done to my sweet boy. He was not at peace. He was not the

Frog I once knew. I looked at my old man fur baby and cried. Goldie took his paw, placed it on my leg, and looked intently up at me. Goldie let me know I was not alone; he was right there with me.

Oct 22, 2020

Facebook post, a poem I wrote while missing Mom

In My Corner

What is it about sad love songs  
That make me feel so damn good

I remember  
The first time  
I felt like this

Didn't know  
How much  
I'd miss

I came home  
From the Brooks Haven Dance  
Something came over me

They asked me  
"Deanna, what's wrong?"  
I couldn't answer

Nothing was wrong  
All was well

I found my way  
In song  
With me and you

I finally responded  
"Nothing is wrong, I am happy"  
And you know what?  
It is true.

They both laughed  
Said my name

I'm still the same  
Crying 'cause I'm sad  
and happy in love

In song  
With you  
Forever with you

Part of me came out that day  
Tonight, she came out too  
So, I could remember  
What it was like  
Being loved by you.

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**Author biography**

Deanna is a third-year Ph.D. student in Gender, Feminism, and Women's studies at York University, Toronto, Ontario with a joint honours degree in Women and Gender Studies and English Literature from the University of Toronto, with a Bachelor and Master of Education from York University. Born and raised in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Deanna moved to Toronto at the age of 21 to become a 'famous' singer. She found her way back to books and began writing about music. She has been published across Canada, including the Globe and Mail, Ryerson Free Press, and the Rock and Roll Report. Deanna's undergrad led her to think critically about being adopted. Deanna is a white domestic adoptee from a closed adoption. Adoptees who lack knowledge of their biological origins may have a complicated relationship with fantasy. Fantasy has the potential to blur reality and subvert normativity to create multiple identities, desires, and possibilities for self. Deanna is going back to her childhood roots to consider the ways song, story, and film reimagine identity and family.