AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WILD* AND *TINY BEAUTIFUL THINGS*

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I met her in a bar, my mother-in-law, though she wasn't my mother-in-law yet. I was twenty-seven and waiting tables in the lounge section of a fancy French restaurant, where she happened to be going for a drink with her girlfriends before they went to a Neil Diamond show. My boyfriend, Brian, had told me to expect her, so I spent the first hour of my shift feeling terribly expectant, my heart lurching with anxiety and anticipation every time another customer walked in. That I had not met her by then had been a source of some tension between Brian and me. We'd been madly in love for eight months. His mother lived in our city—Portland, Oregon—and Brian saw her every week or two, but never, for one reason or another, with me.

"You'll meet her soon," he assured me whenever I inquired. As months passed and I grew bewildered and hurt by his inaction, he begged me not to take it personally. I was misinterpreting the situation, he said. "It's only that I don't want to scare you off," he half joked.

I'd heard enough stories about Joan to know we had some things in common. She'd worked in bars, too, waiting tables and bartending in long-gone Portland places that had legendary names. The Congress Hotel. Sidney's. Jade West. As I zipped around the bar that night with trays of impossibly full cocktails and warm plates of steak frites or croque monsieur stacked along the lengths of my forearms, I felt a tiny swell of pride in my work, though it was just a job that paid the bills while I tried to write my first novel.

I wanted Joan to walk in and see me that way. To see, perhaps, some of her younger self in me, as I swerved confidently about the place, bare-legged in my minidress and Danskos. I hoped she might view me from afar and think I was the kind of woman she'd want her son—her only child—to marry, though I wouldn't have yet said I wanted to marry him. I wanted her to behold me and to like what she saw.

But as it happened, I beheld her first. She and her friends arrived while I was in the kitchen picking up an order, and when I returned to the bar, one of my coworkers gestured to a trio of sixtysomething women sitting in the corner and said, "They're asking for you."

I scanned their faces as I approached, searching for some resemblance to Brian and detecting none. More than anything, they resembled one another—all three of them gussied up for the show in animal-print blouses with Grecian-style sandals and statement necklaces, probably from Chico's. Their freckled arms and décolletages were tanned dangerously brown from their generational eschewal of sunscreen and shade. Their hairdos were as coiffed and cumulous as cotton candy.

"Which one of you is Joan?" I asked when I got to their table, holding my empty tray.

"Guess!" they insisted, making a game of it, much to my chagrin.

"Is it you?" I asked the blonde, who turned out to be Phyllis.

"Is it you?" I asked the brunette, who turned out to be Marge.

"It's you," I said to the strawberry blonde with hazel eyes. Mother of the man I loved.

"Your last pick," Joan said, unamused.

Twenty years later, almost to the very day, Joan was dying. Her doctor said she could live several months, but more likely, it would be less than that. Brian and I hardly needed to be told. We could see that she was weakening by the day, her breath growing more labored, her need for her walker no longer occasional. At eighty-five, she had end-stage chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. In recent months, she'd been in and out of the hospital several times with one lung infection after another, but now, as she was released from the hospital after her latest stay, her doctor came into the room as we collected her and her things and told us there was nothing more to do.

After the three of us absorbed the devastating news, we realized a decision needed to be made, and quickly. Joan was not sick enough to remain in the hospital, but she was no longer capable of looking after herself. A widow who'd remained single since her fifth and final husband had died twenty-one years before, Joan lived in a senior residential community called Russellville Park, where she had a one-bedroom apartment in the independent-living building of the complex. There was a call button in her place she could press in an emergency, but it wasn't intended for regular use. Now that she needed a higher level of care, she was required by the Russellville administrative powers that be to either move out entirely or move into their assisted-living building, which sat

opposite Joan's building, across a courtyard. The need to move into the assisted-living building—which offered support that ranged from helping residents with a few daily tasks to hospice care—had long been a possible outcome of which we were all aware. Joan had chosen to move to Russellville Park a few years before because it offered such an option, but now that a move was inevitable, she was reluctant.

"It's a nice place, Mom," Brian said the day after she'd been released from the hospital, when the three of us gathered in her bedroom to make a plan. A half hour before, a member of the Russellville staff had led Brian and me on a tour, showing us the small, empty apartment that could be Joan's, guiding us briskly down the wide hallways of the building, offering us herbal tea and muffins in the bright cafeteria, extolling the virtues of the place so cheerfully it was as if Joan's potential residency there marked a beginning rather than an end.

"It has a lot of light," I added once we'd returned from the tour, squeezing Brian's hand. We'd displaced a ragtag family of stuffed animals to make room on the love seat near Joan, who half reclined against a high stack of pillows in her bed. They sat scattered around us now—a duck with a jaunty cap, a teddy bear with a bow tie, a beige bunny that Brian clutched like a football I thought he'd throw.

"You can take all your plants," Brian said.

Joan made a little sound of assent as she stared at the television on the wall, which displayed an afternoon talk show on mute; a cannula hissed oxygen into her nose. She wore a floral muumuu that doubled as a nightgown and a dress. It wasn't unlike the one she'd given me for my fortieth birthday, which I'd incorrectly taken to be a joke.

"I guess I have no choice but to go over there," she said finally, glancing toward the window.

"They said you could move in tomorrow if you'd like," Brian said.

"Who will move all my things?" Joan asked.

"We will," he said and looked around. "But the new place is smaller. Maybe half the size of this."

"And double the price," said Joan, aggrieved, though she needn't worry. She'd never been well-off, but by the time she'd retired from her last job, managing the greeting card section in a chain grocery store, she was comfortably middle-class. Between Medicare, her supplemental health

insurance, Social Security, her modest pension, and the savings she had from the condo she'd sold a few years before, she was covered.

"Let's not worry about that," I said, feeling heartsick to be discussing the logistics of living arrangements when only yesterday she'd been told *this was it*—her life was nearly over. I wanted to ask her how she felt, but I knew she'd be furious if I did. "How do you think I feel?" she'd reply in the same exasperated tone she used anytime Brian or I dared to steer our conversations into such territory. Her desire to avoid speaking honestly about complicated feelings was equal to my desire to do the opposite. In the twenty years since we'd met, I'd tried to thwart her evading any discussion of what she called "depressing things," but seldom had I managed. Her determination to stay on the surface was so powerful that it had come to feel like my preference too. It was almost as if, in her presence, I stepped into a force field that quelled my every impulse to dig and say and reveal.

The only exceptions to this were the few occasions we got together for dinner, just the two of us, when Brian was out of town, and Joan had had enough to drink that she'd answer my questions about her life. She told me stories about the mostly single mother who'd raised her amid many hardships; about the austerity of the nuns at the Catholic high school where she'd been a scholarship student; about the working-class jobs she'd had in offices, stores, restaurants, and bars, both before and after Brian was born. She told me she'd realized, during a snowstorm when Brian was eight, that she couldn't bear to be married to his father anymore, bored stiff holed up in a house together for a week without a thing to say to each other. And she told me how, when she was working in a cocktail lounge a few years later, she got to talking to a customer who'd eventually become her last husband, but only after an extramarital affair that spanned five torturous years until he finally left his wife and married her.

"He didn't tell me he was married until after I'd fallen in love with him," she said in her defense—apologetic but also firm in her belief that love trumped everything else.

Though these evenings together were the closest we'd come to bonding, I felt mildly guilty about them, dependent as they were on Joan's inebriation. She was what is sometimes referred to as *a big drinker* and had been all of Brian's life, a sore point for him. Especially because his father had been an even bigger drinker. And yet, it was only during those dinners that Joan and I had what felt to me like a connection, one-sided as our

conversations were, interviews almost. Brief openings when she let me in, though she didn't ask to be let in on my life. Whenever I mentioned my mother—a single mom for a good portion of my childhood who'd worked in bars and restaurants too—Joan changed the subject, no doubt considering her to be among the vast category of "depressing things" because she'd died at forty-five of cancer. Whenever I mentioned my father, from whom I'd been estranged since I was a child because he'd been abusive to my mom and my siblings and me, Joan was quick to end the conversation with a shake of her head or a bland aphorism about how the past was the past.

As we sat in her room contemplating the future, Joan picked up the remote in her lap and turned the silent television off and looked at us. "I know it's a lot of trouble for you to move me," she said, suddenly teary.

"It's no trouble," Brian replied and tossed the bunny aside, reaching over to take her hand.

"Do you want to move in with us instead?" I offered weakly—a question I dared to ask only because I knew she'd say absolutely not.

"Absolutely not," she said with such vigor it sent her into a coughing fit.

Brian shot me a look of alarm, and I shot him a look back, willing him to trust me.

"You know I don't believe that two women can live in the same house, Cheryl," Joan said after she composed herself. "I've always told you that. It creates too much conflict."

I nodded. I did know. She *had* always told me that. And when it came to the two of us, I couldn't disagree. Living together would be a disaster. The way one should cook salmon or broccoli. The kinds and colors of towels that should be kept in the bathroom. Where one should buy groceries and in what amounts. On whose shoulders the grocery shopping should fall. The uses and locations and volumes of televisions. The obligations one had or didn't have to compost. Whether one needed a complete set of crystal glassware. The indispensability or uselessness of place mats and napkin rings and candles one never lit. What species of flowers one should plant in the yard. Whether it was necessary to water a lawn. And yes, even the decorative appeal of stuffed animals. On the domestic front, like on the communication front, Joan and I disagreed on almost everything, and she let me know it.

Brian and Joan disagreed too—he agreeing with me—but their disagreements landed more gently, cushioned, as they were, by the immutable fact of their love.

"There is no greater love than that between a mother and son," Joan had once said to me in a grand and grave tone, and it had rankled me so profoundly that I had to keep tears from coming into my eyes. Not because it seemed to place the bond between them above the bond that Brian and I shared, but because it placed it above the love I had for my mother.

"I don't think love can be ranked," I'd sputtered, though I knew it wasn't true, Joan and I being a case in point. Over the previous two decades, we'd come to love each other, but it was a particular, conditional sort of love, one based on circumstance and courtesy rather than connection and compatibility. Brian was the fulcrum on which our relationship rested, uncomfortable and unsteady as a playground seesaw. We both loved him, and so we were determined to love each other, a resolve that deepened when Brian and I had children—a girl and a boy who were ten and twelve by the time Joan was dying.

I thought of them then. Bobbi and Carver. They were at summer camp in Vermont and wouldn't be home for another couple of weeks. Our only contact with them was through letters that we mailed to each other. I tried to imagine writing to them about Joan's impending death but nixed the idea immediately. We'd tell them after they got home, and they could visit her and say goodbye.

Joan had never been a hands-on grandparent, but she was the only one they ever knew, Brian's father having died a month before we got married. In all their lives, Joan had babysat Carver and Bobbi only twice, and one of those times she didn't even lay eyes on them, arriving after we'd put them to bed. She didn't accept our invitations to join the various kid-themed excursions that had dominated our lives for the previous dozen years—to playgrounds and parks, bouncy houses and swimming pools—and she didn't suggest any activities she could do with them herself. But she loved them in her own distant way, laughing uproariously at funny photographs of them that she'd put in frames, instructing them about their table manners at holiday dinners, bragging about their intelligence or creativity or good looks to her friends. And they loved her too. She was their *nana*. Even as toddlers, they seemed to sense that she was their only tangible link to their ancestors. They claimed her, as if on instinct—climbing naked into her lap

when she visited, pressing their little bodies into hers even as she pulled away, scolding them to put on some pants.

I would do my best to claim her with that kind of tenacity, too, I decided as we sat in her bedroom that day contemplating the end of her life. In whatever time she had left, I would love her differently, better than I had.

Like a daughter would.

We moved her to the assisted-living building in a day. We tossed the expired spices in her cabinet into the garbage and loaded the two cases of jumbo-size bottles of Kahlúa and vodka into a rolling cart and wheeled it into the Russellville Park administrative offices, gifting them to the staff. With no time to cull through the rest of Joan's things, we crammed everything into her new place and carved out a tiny, temporary living area among the boxes and bins and piles, then got to work digging out.

Joan sat in her armchair opposite me in the love seat, saying yes or no as I held up one item after another, telling me if she wanted to keep it or give it away. When the "no" piles grew large enough, Brian would pack them up and take them to the nearby Goodwill, happy for a reason to make a brief escape. Over the course of a week, we made our way through every bowl and saltshaker, every blanket and bookend and decorative hippo figurine. Joan's yeses and noes were delivered in equal measure, and though it seemed unlikely that she would ever again use her waffle iron or don the rain poncho a cruise company had given her decades before, neither Brian nor I had the heart to argue with her about keeping them. The end was close, but Joan was still here. She was receiving hospice care while also settling into a new home. Together, we existed in a strange middle zone where it seemed cruel to suggest what made the most sense: almost everything should go.

I saved her clothes for last, heaps of them, some with their tags still on. Joan was an avid bargain shopper and lifelong snazzy dresser, passions that had been enflamed rather than extinguished by old age. The care she took with her outfits often made me feel frowsy and drab in comparison, a view that Joan no doubt shared, given the number of times she gave me a once-over and asked if I was going to wear that—a question that answered itself, since I already was wearing it. Joan was an unceasing dazzlement in every hue and shade, in every fabric and silhouette, in every wild pattern and sleek monochrome, her shoes and bags perfectly paired with every

outfit she wore. Her jewelry was an inventive hodgepodge of cheapish things that clacked and clanked when she moved. Wide wooden bracelets in rich brown tones and formidable necklaces and earrings made of bold-colored resin or fake gemstones. They were all there in that little assisted-living apartment.

I didn't even try to sort through her jewelry. As multitudinous as it was, it took up relatively little space. It was her clothing that needed to be dealt with. I divided it into categories first, and then we worked our way through the stacks, culling through the shirts and dresses and scarves and skirts and cardigans and blazers until we finally reached the pants, which existed in such abundance that my curiosity got the better of me and I counted them: 127 pairs, a third of which she insisted on keeping.

The other two-thirds, she tried to foist on me.

"They're too small," I said every time, though they just barely were, keeping my voice upbeat and airy, as if the subject of my pant size were nothing between us.

"With all the weight you've lost?" Joan would reply, offering me her highest praise. "They'll fit you perfectly."

Praise but also, perhaps, an apology.

I'd gained more weight than Joan thought appropriate over the course of birthing two children in the span of eighteen months, and she'd made sure I knew about it. When a friend at my baby shower assured me that I was "all belly," Joan had interjected and disagreed, observing that I'd gotten "awfully fat in the face." When I was eight months pregnant with my second child, she gave me a Weight Watchers gift certificate for my birthday. When I complained about my physical discomfort a few days before I gave birth, she told me that hadn't been a problem for her because when she was pregnant with Brian, she'd gained only seven pounds.

"Which means she lost weight!" I sobbed to him later. "It means she starved you!"

"You can't say those things to Cheryl," Brian would tell his mother whenever she'd made another jab, and in response, she'd stammer out a reason for why she'd said what she had, always claiming to want the best for me. She'd tell him to tell me she hadn't meant to hurt my feelings, but she'd never say it to me herself.

Intellectually, I knew her criticisms of my body said more about her than they did about me; I knew they reflected the wider cultural values we'd

both been steeped in all our lives that equated thinness with female beauty and, indeed, value. But they cut me to the core anyway. They heightened my sense of loss and longing for my mom, which was particularly acute in the years when I was becoming a mother myself. *She* would've said I was beautiful. *She* would've commiserated and assured me I was doing great. *She* would've told me everything was going to be okay, regardless of my weight. She would've been everything that Joan was not.

But she couldn't be. She was dead. She lived in abstraction, in memory, in my aching, broken heart, in all the invisible ways I carried her within me. But Joan was there. She was the mother who bore witness to so many passages in my life, the one I was bound to by law. I was married to her only child, the mother of her only grandchildren. I wasn't going to complicate their connection just because she thought I was fat.

"You're big, but you're firm. Like sculpted butter," she once said to me, meaning it as a compliment.

Which, eventually, made me laugh.

By the time we sat together sorting through every scrap of clothing she owned, my hurt had long since settled into hilarity and stoicism and the slightest skitter of sympathy as I held up yet another pair of her one-size-smaller-than-me pants.

Joan could only manage to endure the demands of our slapdash purge in one- or two-hour stints. When she tired, Brian or I would help her from her chair and follow behind her with her oxygen tank as she slowly took up her walker and made her way to the toilet and then to the bed to nap.

While she slept, Brian and I went for walks around the property, wending our way down hallways and up stairwells, circling the courtyard and the parking lot. Sometimes as we walked, we'd call out greetings to the employees. We'd come to know their names and faces because they entered Joan's apartment every few hours, bringing her medication or a meal on a tray, opening her door as they knocked on it. Less often, other practitioners came—people who'd been assigned to her now that she was receiving hospice care—a social worker who left a business card stapled to a brochure Joan would never read; a respiratory therapist who fiddled with the controls on Joan's oxygen concentrator; a pastor who was making rounds and who Joan allowed to sit down and offer her a few brief prayers, even though she wasn't religious.

One morning about two weeks after Joan had moved into the assisted-living apartment, a woman came in, introduced herself as Peggy, then asked Brian and me to leave so she could speak to Joan privately.

Peggy found us later, roaming the hallways, and suggested we talk in the cafeteria. She was in her midsixties and pretty, her white hair a soft tangle of curls that fell past her shoulders. We got cups of water from the dispenser and sat at a table near a window that spanned the entire wall, the flowering bushes on the other side of the glass blooming.

"Your mom's quite the character," Peggy said.

"She is that," said Brian, and we laughed.

"I'm here to be a resource for you," Peggy said. She told us she was a retired nurse with a second career as an end-of-life doula, here to help Joan, but also us.

"How will we know when it starts happening? When she's dying, I mean," Brian asked.

It was a question we'd asked each other ever since we'd been told *this was it*. Joan had become more tired than usual and occasionally forgetful or momentarily confused over the previous couple of weeks, but overall, she hadn't been markedly different from the old Joan. We'd wondered if the rush to move her into the new apartment and hospice care had really been so necessary, if, perhaps, her death wasn't as imminent as we'd been made to believe.

"It's happening already," said Peggy contemplatively. "And I would imagine soon there'll be a shift that will become quite clear to you." Her kind eyes held Brian in their gaze so lovingly I thought she was going to lean across the table and embrace him.

"Does she know it's happening?" I asked. "Like did she share anything with you when you talked to her?"

Peggy looked down at her hands. Her wrists were wrapped in stacks of colorful bracelets made of faded string, her fingers adorned with stone and silver rings. We didn't even know her yet, but already I felt grateful she was here.

"She's resisting," she said at last, "but she's moving toward acceptance. She's preparing to go on the journey."

"I don't suppose she has a choice about that—about going on the journey," I said.

“To some degree that’s true,” said Peggy. “But there’s a spiritual component to dying. To some degree, people need to release whatever’s holding them here before they can make the transition.”

I thought about my mother, who’d died alone in a hospital room in Duluth, Minnesota, only seven weeks after she’d been diagnosed with cancer. I’d been a senior at a university in Minneapolis at the time, but when she got sick, I shut my life down and spent every hour I could by her side. That I had not been with her at the moment of her death had torn me up for years, but eventually I came to understand some version of what Peggy was implying—that to die, my mother *had* to be alone. She wouldn’t let go if I or one of my siblings was in the room. We needed her too much. We held her here.

I didn’t know when Joan would die, but I hoped she’d let Brian be with her when she did. The two of them were opposites in almost every way and shared few interests, but they were unfalteringly devoted to each other. “From the moment he was born, I knew I’d do anything for him,” Joan once said to me, her voice wobbling with emotion. “I knew that all I cared about was his happiness.”

It was an all-encompassing love that Brian never doubted, though we often joked that his mother loved but didn’t *like* him. She was almost comically uninterested in him, asking little to nothing about his thoughts or pursuits. She’d rather discuss the weather or the last dumb thing the mayor did than Brian’s life, or hers. She openly expressed disappointment in his career as a filmmaker and fervent admiration for the careers of our friends who worked in the corporate world. Filmmaking never seemed to her like a real job, the sort where you show up at a certain place at a certain time most days of the week, the sort she could explain to her friends in a sentence. At the premiere of one of his documentaries, as Joan and I sat among an audience applauding Brian onstage, she leaned over to me and said, “What he should’ve done is gotten a teaching license.”

The distance I felt from Joan was at least partly due to my loyalty to Brian, my desire to defend him against the mother who claimed only to want his happiness but wished he would conform to her vision of who he should be—a reality that would make him unhappy. It was a vision that extended to me, too, eventually. When she asked me what I planned to do after I earned my master’s degree in fiction writing, I told her I was going to finish my novel-in-progress and try to get it published.

“Oh, Cheryl,” she said. “How likely is that? You know, at some point you have to give up your dreams.”

Another statement that eventually made me laugh.

“So, Brian,” Peggy said that day before we left her in the cafeteria. “I want you to do something for me.” She paused to take the last sip of water from her paper cup and set it back down on the table with a soft clap. “Tell me about your mom.”

To describe Joan was to tell a story that began with a lie. On her birth certificate, her mother, Betty, falsified both of their names, providing a surname that wasn’t theirs and never would be again. Joan was born at the Florence Crittenton Refuge Home in Portland in 1931, a place where what were then called “fallen women” went to wait out their pregnancies and give birth to babies who’d be marked “illegitimate” on their birth records.

Betty was nineteen and unmarried when she had Joan, her second child born out of wedlock, each one fathered by different men they’d never know. The first child was William, who’d been born two years before Joan, after Betty became pregnant by a high school classmate. Betty had dropped out of school in southern Oregon and moved three hundred miles away to Portland, where she gave birth to William, probably also at the Florence Crittenton Refuge Home, probably also falsifying his birth certificate. She kept him for several months, working as a maid for a rich widower who allowed her and the baby to sleep on a cot in his kitchen, but eventually, it proved to be too difficult to be an impoverished teenage single mother without family support during the Great Depression, so she surrendered William to a local orphanage. When Betty’s mother learned of this a few months later, she came to Portland and adopted William, furious with her daughter for having given him up, though she hadn’t offered her the help that would’ve enabled Betty to keep him.

The following year, Joan was born. Betty kept her and loved her, but she never took William back. Betty’s mom raised William until she died when he was seven, and then he was raised by Betty’s three sisters, each of them taking a turn when they could, depending on their circumstances and finances. He moved from place to place, belonging to all of them and to none of them—an orphan among family—and never in her life would Betty acknowledge him as her son, so unwavering was she in the decision she’d made to relinquish him. Not when he was a child and they saw each other at

family gatherings. Not when he and Joan became teenagers and openly loved each other as siblings. Not when he got married and had children of his own. Not when he became a decorated Portland police detective and Brian's beloved Uncle Bill.

From her earliest memory, she knew that Bill was her brother, Joan told me, though when I asked her to explain how, she couldn't say. "I just knew," she'd answer. All her life, she felt ashamed to have been the chosen one, and yet she was also loyal to her mother, never asking her why she'd made the decision she had about not taking Bill back, never inquiring who her biological father was, considering it a betrayal to even ask.

The identity of her father was a topic I broached often on our rare drunken nights together, during the times when Joan would open up. He lived in Montana was all she knew. Her mother had gone to Billings to stay with her aunt Iona after she'd surrendered Bill to the orphanage, and it was there she'd gotten pregnant with Joan—a fact that Joan learned about only after her mother was dead and her aunts told her.

Joan was content with this tidbit of knowledge, but I was not. Genealogy is a lifelong fascination of mine, and a few months before we were told Joan was dying, I'd discovered there was a treasure trove of information available online. I'd signed up for an account on Ancestry.com and quickly became obsessed, staying up late to track down one ancestor or another, mapping out their lives through census records and birth and marriage and death certificates. Seeing the names of my ancestors and imagining their lives eased an ancient ache inside me—the one that had been made by my father's abuse and abandonment and my mother's early death. It was as if knowing the names of the people who'd come before me would repair some of the familial threads that had been severed in those losses.

My curiosity didn't extend only to my own relations but to Brian's too. Sometimes as Joan napped—which she was doing for longer periods of time as the days passed—I'd log on and continue my search for everything I could about her family. It was astonishingly easy to find documents that told the stories the people in them either would or could not. It was there that I learned Joan had been married five times—twice more than Brian and I had known about. It was there I saw the signature Joan had scrawled on her first marriage certificate the day she turned eighteen in the same small Washington town along the Columbia River where Brian and I would marry

decades later. There that I'd see the divorce papers she filed at nineteen, as well as the documents of a second brief marriage she'd had five years before Brian was born. It was there that I read Joan's falsified birth certificate and saw William's name listed, heartbreakingly, among dozens of other babies in the orphanage in the 1930 census.

And it was there I found Joan's biological father so easily I barely had to search, his name popping up on my computer screen as a "potential ancestor," which I soon confirmed when I found his descendants listed among Brian's DNA matches on the website. Only then did it occur to me that he wasn't just Joan's unknown father. He was also biologically related to my kids.

"I've been doing some family research," I said to Joan one afternoon when we sat across from each other in the armchair and love seat. An unfamiliar cozy feeling had sprouted between us, an intimacy born of the hours we'd spent sitting together over the past few weeks in her small room. "It's genealogy stuff online."

"What have you found?" she asked gamely.

"Your father. I mean, he's dead, but I found his name. Do you want to know it?" I felt a little flutter of excitement. Like I was handing her a gift to unwrap.

She nodded and I said it out loud—her father's name. First, middle, and last.

She looked at me for several moments, pale and exhausted.

"After all this time, it doesn't really matter to me anymore, Cheryl," she said almost apologetically, as if the gift I'd given her was one she already had.

"I wonder if your mom was in love with him or if it was just a fling or why they didn't get married," I said. "What do you think?"

She shrugged and said nothing. Sometimes I felt sorry for her that, of all the daughters-in-law in the world she could've had, she'd ended up with me.

"That's what happened to my mom," I volunteered. "She got pregnant with my sister when she was nineteen and my dad was twenty. That's why they got married."

"That's why a lot of people got married," Joan said and picked up the Danielle Steel novel that sat open and face down in her lap. "I'm going to read for a bit."

“I will too,” I said and picked up my book, though I couldn’t concentrate on it. I kept stealing glances at Joan, who I sensed wasn’t reading much either. She usually tore through a book every day or two, but lately she could scarcely finish a page.

“Were there any other children?” she asked after a while, her voice barely audible over the gentle roar of her oxygen concentrator.

It took me a few moments to comprehend what she was asking me.

“Yes,” I said. “He got married fourteen years after he met your mom, and he and his wife had three children—a daughter and then two sons. They’re all still alive.”

She closed her book, setting it into the basket beside her chair.

“Guess what the daughter’s name is?” I asked.

“Joan,” she said immediately, correctly, and together, incredulous, we laughed.

Not long after that, Joan took to her bed entirely. No more getting up to sit in her chair for a few hours to hold a paperback she was too worn out to read. No more walking slowly to the toilet as we followed behind her. She didn’t have the strength to do either anymore. A nurse’s assistant inserted a catheter and hooked the bag to the side of her bed. The trays of food that were brought to her three times a day were only lightly picked over. Peggy invited us to another cafeteria meeting, where she told us what we already knew: the journey had begun.

Our first indication that something had shifted was a voice mail Joan left in the middle of the night a day or two after the kids returned from camp. We listened to it upon waking, startled by the scrambled, nonsensical story she told. She said she’d been accused of a crime she hadn’t committed and now a man was trying to get her and lock her up. She whimpered and sobbed on the phone, begging us to help. We understood that she could only be hallucinating—Peggy had told us this might happen, and I’d seen something like it myself when my mother was dying—but Joan’s frantic tone set off a sense of mild panic inside us. As soon as we heard her message, we drove to Russellville Park like it was an emergency. As if a terrible man really *was* going to come and cart Joan off to jail for a crime she didn’t commit if we didn’t get there quickly enough.

But when we walked into her room, she was sitting up in her bed, drinking ice water from a big plastic tumbler with a straw, looking frail but

happy to see us, asking us groggily about the kids. It went like that for the next several days, zigzagging between calm reason and wild delirium. She waxed and waned from confusion to a clear command of her faculties. It seemed imperative to Brian and me that Carver and Bobbi come to visit her, but every time we suggested it, Joan was adamant that they stay away, insisting she didn't want them to see her in the state she was in. "You can bring them when I'm feeling better," she'd say in a tone so crisp it ended the conversation. To argue with her was close to impossible because it required us to say out loud what no one wanted to say: that Joan would not ever be feeling better.

Plus, she had a point. She often *was* in a terrible state. For hours each day, she'd lie with her eyes clenched shut and a pained expression on her face as she narrated the things she believed were happening to her, all of them ghastly and horrifying. It was agonizing and terrifying to witness, especially for Brian, who was powerless to protect her from the perils she imagined. My mother's hallucinations had been nothing like Joan's. Most had been tender and sweet, primarily involving a conviction that all the animals she'd loved over the course of her life were with her in the room—horses and cats and dogs, and even a goat and a few hens.

"And who are we to say they weren't?" I'd taken to saying when I told people about my mother's final days. "If she believed they were there with her, they were," I said.

I hoped I was wrong about that as Brian and I sat beside Joan's bed, listening to the dreadful things she believed. The man who'd tried to apprehend her for crimes she hadn't committed soon branched out into other things. He chased her to the edge of a high cliff and tried to push her off. He stood at the bottom of a flaming pit and attempted to pull her down into it. He lurked, barely visible behind a veil of darkness, and reached toward her menacingly, trying to drag her in. She whimpered with fright and shouted out in terror, begging Brian to help her. When he assured her that he was right there and she was safe, that no one was trying to push her off a cliff or pull her into a fire or drag her into a fathomless darkness, she sobbed and told him he was useless. She asked how he could betray her like this, how he could be so cruel to his own mother, bitterly condemning him for failing to save her.

"She's working out her unfinished business," said Peggy, assuring us that this was par for the course, though she granted that Joan was having a

particularly difficult transition.

“Who do you think the man is?” I asked Brian, and he said he didn’t imagine it was anyone in particular. He thought instead that it was a combination of emotions and experiences his mother had never fully expressed or resolved. The regrets she had, the trauma she’d buried, and perhaps most of all, the shame she carried about Bill, even though he’d never blamed her for Betty’s decision. He and Joan had remained close until he’d died a decade before.

It wasn’t exactly true that Betty had never acknowledged Bill as her son and Joan’s brother. When she was dying—when she was in the very moment that Joan was now approaching—she’d asked Bill to visit her, sending word through Joan. Bill was fifty-eight by then. His mother hadn’t directly addressed him since he was an infant. He’d waited so long for her he’d finally given up. He didn’t go to her on her deathbed. At the end of her life, he relinquished her with the same unwavering decisiveness with which she’d relinquished him at the beginning of his.

“I’m sorry!” Joan would sometimes holler, but the man who menaced her would not relent. “He’s going to get me!” she shouted over and over.

Desperate to help, Brian took a new tack, at Peggy’s suggestion. Instead of attempting to soothe his mother by denying her reality, as he’d been doing, he validated it, joining as best as he could in the scenarios she narrated, coaching her about how she might escape the man and survive the darkness, the fire, and the frightful drop from the cliff.

But nothing comforted her. She was as unreachable in this mysterious borderline place as any of us were. Death was her journey alone to take.

When the hallucinations receded, she would open her eyes and speak with us, temporarily restored to herself, and we’d implore her to sip water from the straw of the big tumbler that sat always on the rolling tray near her bed. One time when I was alone with her, she fixed me with a clear-eyed gaze.

“Why didn’t you like me?” she asked in the past tense, as if she were already gone.

“I like you,” I sputtered, shocked. Then: “Why didn’t you like *me*?”

“You can call me Mom instead of Joan now that you’ll be my daughter-in-law,” she’d said to me drunkenly the night before I married Brian.

“Okay,” I’d said, though I knew I never would. I couldn’t—and not because of anything Joan had done. I loved my own mom too much to call anyone else by her name, my grief too fresh. I began to explain this as delicately as I could, as we stood together in the kitchen while the night-before-our-wedding party buzzed around us, but someone came up to us, laughing, interrupting, and we never spoke of it again.

“I like you,” I repeated, more emphatically and more gently too. It wasn’t only that I sometimes felt sorry for Joan that she’d gotten me as a daughter-in-law. The reverse had also been true. But standing there beside her, it wasn’t anymore. “I love you, Joan,” I said, meaning it.

“You’ve made Brian so happy,” she said, closing her eyes, drifting off again. “That’s all that matters to me.”

By the fourth week after Joan moved into the new apartment, she’d become so thin her body was almost skeletal—the trays of food the employees brought untouched. Brian stayed with her practically around the clock, while I remained home with the kids. I went to Russellville Park for visits each day, but as Joan grew weaker, I kept my distance out of respect for the bond she cherished above all others—that between her and Brian. Sometimes when I walked in, he’d be hovering over her bed, singing chants in Sanskrit that we knew from our favorite Krishna Das album or reciting the prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi, which he silently repeated to himself when he meditated each day.

When she slept, we’d lie side by side on the carpet in the corner of the room with our legs up on the wall, talking in whispered tones until the blood drained from our feet and they tingled. Brian told me he couldn’t imagine the world without his mother in it, but he was also grateful to have had her for as long as he did. I could see the sorrow on his face, but it was also threaded with acceptance and something like closure. He held on to her, while telling her over and over again that it was okay to let go.

“It’s almost time,” he said to me one day after I arrived. When his mother had kicked off her blankets that morning, he’d noticed her legs were mottled red and purple, a sign that death was soon approaching, Peggy told him.

That afternoon, I picked up the kids after school—that week they’d begun fifth and sixth grades—and I told them we were going to see their nana. When she was awake enough to talk, Joan had continued to protest

the idea of them visiting her, but it was now or never. I had to trust my own instincts as a mother, even if it meant being a disobedient daughter-in-law. I'd never forgive myself if I didn't give Carver and Bobbi the chance to say goodbye to their grandmother. As we drove to Russellville Park, I told them what they might see, bracing them for her frailty and warning them about her hallucinations, which had mercifully begun to wane by then.

I feared she'd be angry when we walked into her room, but instead her eyes lit up and she grasped their hands, telling them how glad she was they came. I could see how mightily she strained not to alarm them, how entirely she had to gather her strength to seem to be only just a bit tired as they stood at the foot of her bed telling her they loved her and saying they were sorry she didn't feel well.

In the moments before we left, when Brian and the kids had wandered away from her bedside and I'd remained behind, Joan looked at me with the same intensity and vulnerability with which she'd looked at me when she'd asked why I didn't like her. She reached out suddenly and clutched my hand, and I clutched her hand back, our eyes meeting more deeply than they ever had. It had been more than twenty years since she'd walked into that bar and I'd picked her last. She'd been alive in my life for nearly as long as my mother had. She was my family, my ancestor, no matter our distance or difficulties or disappointments, the truth of that finally crackling between us.

"Thank you," she whispered with more force and clarity than I thought she had left. In three days, she'd take her last breath as Brian held her. "Thank you," she said again, like she wanted me to remember it.

And I did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Cheryl Strayed is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, which was made into an Oscar-nominated film; *Tiny Beautiful Things*, which was adapted into a Hulu television series and as a play; *Brave Enough*; and the novel *Torch*. Her books have sold more than five million copies worldwide and have been translated into more than forty languages. Her award-winning essays and short stories have been published in *The Best American Essays*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post Magazine*, *Vogue*, and elsewhere. Strayed writes the popular Substack newsletter "Dear Sugar" and has hosted two hit podcasts, *Dear Sugars* and *Sugar Calling*. She lives in Portland, Oregon.

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