

WAKE OF RIVER ROAD: A HEALING NARRATION

by

CORREEN K. NICHOLS

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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Approved:



A handwritten signature in ink, appearing to be "J. Earl", written over a horizontal line.

(Dr. James W. Earl)

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Grief is not something you recover from;
it is something you incorporate into your life.

*To my mom, for her strength—
Tessa, for understanding—
Boo, for his story—*

and for Dad

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Wake of River Road: An Introduction

In the corridor outside of the gym at Chico High, I can hear the echo of the basketballs bouncing against the hardwood. This is the gym I grew up in: an old concrete building with paint chipping off the stucco finish. The tiles on the ceiling are coming loose and occasionally plummet to the floor during basketball practices, the bleachers are pushed in against the wall, released only for game nights or school rallies. My dad played basketball in this gym when he was in high school. So did I. And he also coached basketball in this gym for twenty years feeling lucky his friends who taught at the high school let him “help out” and assist their teams. In grade school, I spent my Friday nights running around behind the bleachers while Dad coached. He yelled at the junior varsity boys to “get down” on defense or to “box-out” when rebounding. Sometimes the young players’ faces went blank as they struggled to figure out if Coach Nichols was just a grumpy farmer or if he really knew anything about basketball.

When I reached the same age as the players he coached and spent my own hours running up and down the court trying to play defense or box-out, my friends who played for him said to me, "Corrie, your dad is mean out there. He's always yelling." After hearing what a bad reputation my dad was developing, I went to him with the intention of letting him know that he needed to be nicer as a coach.

"Dad, they think you're mean." I said accusingly.

"Mean? They think I'm mean?" he asked grinning.

I nodded.

"Good," he said. "Good."

It isn't until now, standing outside of this old gym that I smile at his response. I'm about to walk into the gym, not as a player, but for the first time as a coach. I'm lucky enough to "help out" and assist the varsity girls' basketball team. My challenge will be to convince fifteen junior and senior girls that they should listen to me, an ex-player only four years their senior. I open the doors to the gym and I think to myself, *Dad I hope you were right. I hope they think I'm mean.*

My struggle to cling to the memory of my father has culminated into the following pages of *Wake of River Road*. After walking into that gym five months after he died, and now finding myself still trying to fill his shoes two years after his death, I have learned that grieving is a process. A process that never ends. Grief is not something to recover from; it is something you learn how to incorporate into your life.

Stunned by losses I had never before been faced with, I embarked upon a written journey that started out as a desperate attempt to make my dad's life permanent. My fear

of losing the memories I had of my dad and of losing the life I had when he was alive prompted my project. However, as the days went by and his memory slowly solidified within the written words, it became apparent that my writing turned into a way for me to tell my own story: *Wake of River Road* became my healing narrative.

Healing Through Narration

I became interested in the idea of “telling my story” after I went to hear Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak about his struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. The death of a beloved father and the racist murders of thousands of people might not seem to coincide; however, the healing process after tragedies of varying degrees can follow the same path. The Archbishop conveyed that much of his work was concentrated on giving the victims of atrocity a forum for their stories to be told. He found there was much relief and healing in getting the opportunity to not only express what you’ve been through, but also receive acknowledgement and affirmation that others hear you. As I connected the feelings of expression to my own life, I became aware of the truth of his message.

I first intended to record my family’s long history as a farming family in Northern California. I grew up as the fourth generation in my hometown of Chico on the same land as my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. When my dad died, not only had I lost his friendship and guidance, but because our farm operates as a hereditary business, I felt I’d lost connection to an entire history. My grandmother died soon after my dad and I felt desperate to record the names and faces of generations of family

members now swiftly increasing their distance from me. However, as I got deeper into the writing process and learned more about myself as a writer, I learned that my intention to record the family history was only a mask for dealing with my own struggle to reconcile the premature death of my dad.

The Writing Process: Creative Non-Fiction

Having never been involved in creative writing classes before, I was surprised to realize that there was a name for the kind of writing I was doing: creative non-fiction. The stories I wanted to tell were true and because I wasn't always at the events that inspired the stories I wanted to tell, I had to be creative. I wanted to give the reader different perspectives by incorporating various voices from my family. However, as I wrote more and more, my voice became the main narrative. My new struggle as a writer centered on defining the style of writing I was doing. I was telling my story: Was I writing a memoir? I also had incorporated different voices and some detached and philosophical poetry. I felt odd calling my writing "a memoir" at so young an age and as such a new writer. I knew that what I was doing was not just telling my own story, but telling a story that profiled and described the man I knew as my father.

Having now experienced both a fiction creative writing class and a non-fiction creative writing class, I have learned immeasurable amounts about myself as a writer. Most importantly, I have learned that I have much more to learn. Writing *Wake of River Road* was indeed a process. And indeed a process that will never end. I'm not convinced that I've answered the questions about my family farming history that my dad's death

created. Or if I fully understand what part of my story I've told. However, I am convinced that I've learned plenty about what it means to lose your "self" in writing. I've learned how to remain a farmer's daughter with out a father. I've learned what it means to be a daughter to my mother. And I feel calmed by the fact that others who never met my dad will get to know a part of him when they read the pages of *Wake of River Road*.

Wake of River Road

Wazney's

We wind our way past the almond orchards and country houses and as the trees become less dense, the heat from the pavement of River Road becomes more intense. We live in town, even though the Nichols Ranch is fifteen minutes out of town. River Road is a road traveled by few, but often by those who know the way out of town on the back roads. Until recently, until the wooden sign with the white letters "Nichols Ranch, Inc." went up, the right turn off River Road onto the gravel road that leads to the ranch was an easy turn to miss.

I don't remember the first time I ever made the turn off River Road to the ranch. My grandparents, Harry and Sally Nichols, remembered first making that turn. But my dad, his brother Bill and sister Nancy were too young to remember their first trip to the ranch. It is the children of the Nichols family who don't possess the memory of first making the hard-to-find turn. The ranch is where we go when we spend a day with our grandpa, dad or uncle. The ranch, the turn, River Road, has always been there.

The turn for the ranch isn't the only thing that's easy to miss on River Road. Wazney's, the local BBQ restaurant, is masked as an old red farmhouse and most fly by it, seeing only the open road ahead of them. Wazney's sits on the corner of the last city block before River Road breaks into the winding two-lane country road. Those who slow for the turn into the Wazney's parking lot are often farming locals. And my Grandpa Harry, being a signature farming local, frequented no other place on his birthday.

During Grandpa Harry's birthday dinners, Dad took me to say hello to the old woman who watched TV from her wheelchair in her house behind the restaurant. We went before the main course came, but after we had soup and salad. She was happy to

see Dad when he walked into her front room, and when he introduced me, she looked upon me with kind knowing eyes that reflected my youth. Her sons ran the BBQ, roasting steaks and baked potatoes for the old timers. The restaurant has gone in and out of business in the past few years. Since the old woman watching TV from her wheelchair passed away.

Wazney's was the segue between rural and urban and my family frequented the place. Maybe because the food was good or maybe simply because we were used to heading out that way. Most of the time, when we drove out River Road we passed right by Wazney's. Then it was another fifteen minutes until we reached the hard-to-find turn to the Nichols Ranch.

Green Monster

do you see anything?

nothing.

do you hear him?

no.

see him?

sometimes I think I do.

where did he go?

I don't know.

I'm scared.

me too.

I can't see anything.

me neither.

how long has it been?

forever.

it's quiet.

I know.

what should we do?

I don't know.

just wait and see?

I guess...

I'm gonna go see if I can find him.

be careful, it's dark under there.

He roared out from under the not-too-long table shrouded in a dark green knit blanket, the one that covered him as he sat in front of the T.V. on those nights sleep was impossible. Tessa and my high pitched screams accompanied his roar as we scrambled to run in the other direction from the Green Monster suddenly emerging from under the table in the dimly lit dining room. Around, around the table we ran until the Green Monster stopped to turn the other way, making us scramble to coordinate turning around together. Tessa's light brown hair, curled tightly upon her five-year-old head, bounced as she skirted around me, hoping the size of her older sister would help protect her from the figure draped beneath the green blanket. But my eight-year-old legs were faster than hers were and she was trapped behind me. The Green Monster closed in. Soon she was

captured and enveloped into the green blanket where she disappeared, leaving only her giggles to let me know she was being tickled to death. After the proper time for tickle torture passed, Tessa escaped and the game began again.

The lone table sat in the middle of the dining room. The table was long, but not so long that it took up all the space of the high-ceilinged dining room. It wasn't so long that my sister and I couldn't dance around it as we listened to Raffi sing about the bay where the watermelons grew. Our house was built across the street from a park filled with looming crooked oak trees that provided shade in the summer and added eeriness to the chill of a winter day. The windows in the dining room were faded and shadowed with a permanent dirty frost that had accumulated over the years. Huge ceilings arched at the top just where the chandelier hung over the table's center. The high ceilings helped to provide room for the sounds of the records that radiated through the speakers sitting on either side of the antique buffet. Raffi's voice filled each corner of the large but comfortable space as Mom succumbed to preparing dinner every evening for me, Tessa, and Dad, after she got home from the high school where she worked as a guidance counselor. The warm glow of the kitchen shown through the doorway where the steam from the boiling water on the stove signaled Mom might be making our favorite spaghetti dinner. We referred to the large room as the dining room, though we rarely dined there. The space was most often reserved for dancing to records as Tessa and I waited for Dad to get home so we could play Monster.

It was exciting when Dad got home. The hours spent with Mom were common, but the hours with Dad were rare, like the bowl of ice cream we sometimes got after dinner. Because Dad was a farmer and he worked late, Green Monster game nights were

few and far between. Dancing around the table in anticipation of his arrival was more common, although it never was as fun when he wasn't there dancing and singing along with us. Most evenings my mom beckoned to Tessa and me that dinner was ready and it always took her at least two or three calls to get us seated and ready to eat. The three of us shared dinner together during most of the year because Dad was at the ranch. Only in the wintertime was there a break from planting, harvest, or irrigation. But winter was filled with coaching basketball practices and games that still kept Dad away in the evenings. The three of us sat at the table in the breakfast nook where we ate every meal, and waited for the white truck to show its red tail-lights as it backed in to the driveway. Dad always backed his cars into driveways, wherever we were. Most often he tried to find a shady tree to park the car under so we wouldn't burn our legs when we came back, and also to keep his dog from dying of the heat. It was kind of embarrassing; I wondered why he wouldn't just be like everyone else and pull straight in to the parking places. But Dad did a lot of things different from everybody else. Not even Tessa knew of anybody else's dad who played the Green Monster game.

Mom, Tessa and I were usually in the middle of dinner when I got to announce, "Dad's home," because my seat faced the window to the driveway. When Dad was late I worried. We never knew exactly when Dad would be home, but most often it was later than when we thought. In the mornings after he teased my mom about not making him breakfast, and they gross-kissed at the doorway, she asked him what time he'd be home and I payed attention to that part even though I couldn't see them from my where I sat eating my breakfast. When he was late I could feel my chest get tight and I wouldn't be able to breathe. Tessa had them too: Dad called them the "heebie-jeebies," which was

what he said he had and that's how Tessa and I got them. I didn't know if Mom had them, because she always knew what was going on, except when she sometimes got mad at him for being late and not calling or if he didn't tell her stuff that he'd planned. She liked to know what was going on. So maybe she did have them if she got mad. I didn't know if heebie-jeebies made you mad, but they made me scared. Sometimes so scared I didn't know what to do. I got them a lot when he was late. What would happen if Dad never came home? But despite my constant worry, every night he made it home from the ranch and the heebie-jeebies went away.

After he put the dog in the pen and washed his hands at the back door sink, his long arms wrapped around Tessa and me when we went to the door to greet him. He was 6'4", and because of his strong, lean, stature everybody asked him how tall he was. Often he was covered from head to toe in dust, dirt, or grease, whatever soil his life as a farmer brought him in contact with. Sometimes we could only see the whites of his eyes and teeth to tell that the dark creature lurking at the back door was Dad. When he was really dirty after harvest or when he had been disking a field all day, he took all his clothes off at the back door and wearing only his underwear, walked to the back of the house to his room. Leaving the soiled clothes on the hook and revealing his genuine farmer's tan, he walked down the hall regardless of whether we had friends over or not. "Dad!" we whined. My mom playfully exhaled an exasperated "John..." or just rolled her eyes. He grinned. On his way to his bedroom for a shower, he knew full well his indecency and the embarrassment he caused us.

During the busy summer months he got home long after dark. Then he headed out to the back yard to the specially made brick shower built with a tall shower-head and

high walls. After the shower, he emerged clean, with his hair washed but uncombed, eyes still red from the dust and the hot dry day. Then he looked in the refrigerator where Mom saved him his dinner on a plate covered with saran-wrap. She made sure to put his salad, undressed, into a separate bowl. If Tessa and I were still awake he'd bring his dinner into the family room where we did our homework and watched T.V. Tessa didn't usually eat very much dinner and when Dad got home she asked him for bites of his dinner. He made a big deal about it, and teased her, "Didn't you already eat?" But he gave it to her anyway.

When it was really late, and Tessa and I had already gone to bed in the room we shared, it was the sound of the truck, the clanging of the dog-pen gate and the slam of the back door that let us know he was home. If Mom was in her room she came down the long hall, past our open door (because having the heebie-jeebies meant you were scared of the dark) and greeted him warmly in the kitchen. It was these sounds that allowed me to fall asleep, because if Dad wasn't home yet, I could rarely fall asleep. Tessa had the same problem with sleep as me, but she didn't know she couldn't sleep because was worrying about Dad until after we were transferred to our own rooms upstairs. Although neither of us knew it from our separate bedrooms, the same reassuring sounds that Dad and the dog made it back from the ranch allowed us to fall asleep at night.

When I was in high school and Dad got home late, he never failed to make the trek up the stairs while his dinner was re-heating in the microwave. If I'd already gotten in bed, I could hear the soft sounds of his long legs climbing the carpeted stairs leading to our bedrooms. If my door was closed, I'd hop up and open it to let him know that I wanted a chat when he finished talking to Tessa. Or if my door was open and the room

was dark, he peered in the cracked door to see if I was still awake. Opening my eyes, I'd notice him standing there, and say, "I'm awake." He made his way to sit at the foot of my bed and ask about basketball practice or the math test I was fretting about that morning. "How long you are," he commented when he realized I had to move my legs to make room for him at the end of the bed. My 5'10" frame always shocked him and prompted the retelling of his memories of carrying me around as a baby, sideways, front facing out, as I fit along just one forearm.

As the only male in the house, he held the equilibrium between the three girls in our family—four, if you counted the cat. The only males were my Dad and the dog. Maybe that's why he always had male dogs, he needed some support. When Tessa and I did something wrong, like experiment in the liquor cabinet or smoke behind the closed doors of our bedrooms, he helped my mom to see her guilt-ridden daughters tortured by the thought of disappointing their parents. His patience in addressing the issue was punishment enough, for all of us.

His equivalent of a reprimand usually came in the form of a trip to the ranch. You could always tell you're close to the hard-to-find turn when D.B., our yellow lab, riding in the back of the truck started to whimper. Once we reached the red water-emergency line they put in the dips of the road to warn drivers when it flooded, and the old brick house on the right, Dad applied the brakes. Immediately, there was no more rhythm to D.B.'s frenzy in the back of the truck. The anticipation of the leap out on to the gravel road for the run into the shop was almost more than D.B. could bear. It was an easy turn to miss for anyone who hadn't been there before.

The “Ranch Day Reprimands” were the kind of trip where you didn’t have the choice of going or not. The drive out River Road was silent. At first. Then Dad broke the silence by saying something that never seemed to relate to why I was in trouble and took me a while to put into the context of the situation. Sometimes it came in the form of a story about his relationship to his own parents. How his mom would get so mad at him for being ornery. And since even then she was littler than he was, she couldn’t catch him. She would only be able to catch hold of one arm as he ran around and around her and she swung at his butt yelling, “Just wait ‘til your father gets home!” He ended the story there, leaving it up to me to understand what he meant by telling it. My conclusion: That my grandparents were as foreign to me as strangers. He was trying to point out that I’m lucky my parents were different than them.

The best part about the reprimands: they included lunch and sometimes a lesson in driving some sort of tractor, truck, or harvester. We circled the shop and silos, learning how to stop accordingly before we took equipment anywhere else. In the afternoons, if we drove twenty miles southeast of River Road to Richvale to check the rice water, we stopped at the dryer’s truck scales. In the back of the office was the little freezer that had ice cream. In front of the Eskimo Pies and Fudgsicles there was a coffee can with a sign that read, “25 cents.” The ice cream came after we’d made the rounds, looking at the water in each rice check, and was a welcome relief to the sweltering heat of the North Valley. As dusk settled in, we drove back to town through the back roads. The air cooled, the sky came alive.

I know no boundaries.

I have been here long

Before they drew the lines of their ownership.

From up above I look like a snake.

Like footprints, my marks show where I've been.

I give and take.

Take and give.

From whichever side I'm taking—

The opposite side is being given.

They tried to dam me.

But what I will always have, they cannot ever have.

They will never be able to anticipate me.

I weave through the land near River Road.

Long before the Nichols Family

Believed they bought my banks.

In 1951, Harry E. Nichols began to purchase the

491 acres of land that hugs the path of my water.

Harry E. Nichols

I remember the first time I made that turn off River Road and onto the dirt road that would lead me to the 491 acres I would farm for the rest of my life. It was an easy turn to miss if no one had shown you where to turn beforehand. In 1951, I was living with my wife and three young children. Nancy was the oldest and only girl, followed by my two sons John and Bill. My parents owned The Nichols Hardware Store on the corner of 4th and Broadway. The hardware business was something I grew up in and though for me to take over seemed the natural step, it just wasn't something I was going to do. It's a good thing I didn't. It burned down in 1954.

Farming was what I was meant to do; I learned it and loved it on my own. It was mine. My own. I had had my share of farming previous to buying the land off of River Road working for various farmers in the fields or leasing land from larger landowners. My wife Sally came from a farming family—her father owned the largest acreage for rice production in our area. She understood my passion, my desire. In 1951, with the help of my father and the bank, I bought my own land, 491 acres off of River Road on your way out of town, its boundaries defined by the Sacramento River to the West and River Road and new almond and walnut orchards to the East.

The closeness of the River primed the soil for row crops. No rice though—the soil is too thick and soft for rice production. But row crops—tomatoes, kidney beans, lima beans, sugar beets, safflower, wheat, and corn. I could grow it all. My sons would work the land with me. They would learn how to love it and work it. They would understand me because they would smell the sweetness of the dew before sunrise; they would feel the aching back while moving sprinkler pipe. They would see the dust glow

in the sunset, feel the anguish of a disastrous flood or freezing weather, and feel the satisfaction of a right decision and a successful harvest. Because they had this they would be able to understand me, and I would be able to—almost more importantly—understand them.

Wisdom of Motherhood

Going away from my mother made me realize she is a wise woman. I left her in Chico to attend University of Oregon in Eugene. It was in Eugene I realized her wisdom. Before, Mom was the one I butted heads with. The one I had to deal with every day. Who made her contribution to my decisions whether I asked or not. At the time, I just thought she was boring, my mom who in her efforts to get worked up over my minor mistakes had lost track of her spirituality and her kindred spirit. The one who was always in control, who was more likely to cry over spilled milk. Not really cry. Just gasp. The startling, “oh-something-horrible-just-happened” gasp. Not my idea of a carefree playmate willing to explore the depths of the adolescent soul with me.

We held hard standards of each other. But when it came down to it, Mom could break down the barrier between adult and child and help both Tessa and I to conquer the difficulties of trying to grow to be anything but like her. What we didn't realize was that things worked the way they did because my mother was in control. Dad wasn't the type of person able to pay the bills on time or anticipate how long it might take to get two kids out the door fed, dressed and content. Her organization complemented my dad's lack of structure and his ability to move accordingly loosened my mother's grip on our daily schedules.

When you're young, it's hard to look past demands and supervising eyes, but the farther away I got from my mom, the more I saw her as a brilliant, tough, beautiful woman who was so loving that once she became a mother, mothering overtook her. I think it happens to a lot of women that way. Motherhood. When they become mothers, they become so frightened and terrified of losing their children, they police them to no

end. I began to see her wisdom when I grew older and she needed to worry about me less. Her wisdom came to me in a comment about change. As I was complaining and catastrophizing over some fairly insignificant decision, she looked at me with the grace and ease she always maintained, “Change is the only thing you can ever count on always happening and always being there.” After this comment I realized she remembered what it was like to be young. I would later find out that she knew how to be young so well that she didn’t need to experiment with it any more. Youngness was something she had lived, something she had incorporated into her life. Youngness was something she had conquered.

Christina Kopriva Nichols

It was May of 1968. My roommate Patsy and I had just finished our Friday afternoon class on Eastern European History and stopped by the college bar, The Oasis, commonly known as “The O,” for a drink. I walked in, after having thrown my books in the back seat of my green VW Bug parked on the other side of the tracks, relieved that it was a Friday evening. I settled into a seat next to Patsy at a table surrounded by all our girlfriends. Susie, nicknamed Mouse, was from the Bay Area, like me. Marcy was from Chico, Margie and Claudia came from Sacramento, and Cindy grew up in a little town outside of Fairfield. We had all met in the dorms our first year at Chico State and now here we were, four years later, already close to graduation. You didn’t go far from home for college back then, if you went at all. The Catholic schools my parents sent my two sisters and me to did a fine enough job preparing us for college, but it was different then. If you weren’t from big money you stayed close to home in order to afford travel and living expenses. I let out a sigh as I looked about the faces of my girlfriends, reflecting back upon what now seemed like a short time in college together, not knowing that tonight was the first time I would see him.

Patsy dated John for a while a few months ago, so I knew who he was. I hadn’t taken much notice before, but as the door to The O opened with his slender 6’4” frame, shaggy brown hair, and bright blue eyes, I stopped to ponder the young man who had just entered the bar. John let the door shut quietly behind him, all the while flashing his famous grin that could befriend even the hardest stranger. Whoops and hollers came from his buddies seated at the bar as they greeted him with the familiar, “Farmer John!” He was one of the only guys who wasn’t a full time student. He was set apart from his

friends because he worked at the ranch with his father, but still he managed to meet all the basketball guys and the drinking guys, though he rarely drank with them. He grew up in Chico but had moved to San Diego for a few years where he studied and played basketball. He left it to come back to farm with his dad, a relationship I don't think I ever quite fully understood. When I picture him walking through the door that night, I think to myself, *That's the man I first fell in love with.* The skinny young farmer who met his friends for a drink after a long day on the tractor or driving truck with his black lab, "Nick The Show-Dog."

Not long after that night at The O, John took me out River Road and made the easy-to-miss right turn while Nick performed his frenzy in the back of the pick-em-up-truck (as John called it). I remember that first trip out to the Ranch so clearly. I remember thinking how this land stretched forever and feeling the beauty of a farmer's life so glorified as we pulled to the right of the gravel road to let another truck pass by. I think back now about the long days, the failed harvests, flooding and freezing weather that accompanies the life of a farmer, and smile at my naivete. I know John took me out there so I could see him. As we looked over the River at the changing sky during the sunset, we talked about the ranch. I asked my usual thorough questions about what they grew and who worked there and were there any issues in employing Mexican farm workers and is this what you want to do forever? As we sat there, he fielded my questions with ease and knowledge and insight. I was sitting on a beautiful piece of land that hugs the river with a man I had just begun seeing, and as we talked about the Ranch and I experienced its beauty for the first time, his eyes filled with tears, unable to find words to describe what this place meant to him.

That was the first of many easy-to-miss right turns off River Road I made over the years. There is only one other that I remember as clearly as that first. I will never forget the turn my daughter and I made off River Road the day after he died.

I come from the snow in the mountains.

Amazing.

Amazing that my dirty warm water,

Swallowing trees and riverbanks,

Came from the softest water on earth.

From the high mountains.

It starts with a trickle in the early spring.

The sun begins to warm the earth.

The ice slowly melts.

Rolling quietly off the mountainside.

Forming little gurgling springs and streams.

The streams then come together at the base of the peak.

It keeps going.

Down, down, down.

Growing larger and longer and stronger.

Until, before you know, nature has created me.

I am left to swell, and to dry up.

According to her plan.

I am always changing.

There is no way for the farmers to know.

Though I have flowed past

the Nichols Ranch for over 50 years,

I continue to surprise them.

They need me.

I make the soil rich and thick.

We have a good relationship.

That ranch and I.

Two years ago it rained so hard.

So hard I had to burst forth from my banks.

Relieve myself of the incredible pressure.

I spilled onto acres and acres of their winter wheat.

I have always been able to surprise them.

Because I am always changing.

But even with my element of surprise,

It was not me who sent them reeling back.

Reeling back in shock and despair.

Farmer Etiquette

It's easy to glorify someone after he dies. Easy to remember all the wonderful, funny things about a dead person when he is gone. You attend a service where the still-alive people get up and say nice things about the dead person and you sit there quietly wondering if you're at the right service. Every person is wonderful in special ways, but we tend to make them more wonderful and special than they were after they are gone. It's very easy to glorify people in death—what's not easy to do is to glorify people in life. But I can think of no other way to describe my relationship with Dad. As a father, he was wise and kind and strict—but only strict by example. He never told me how I should be, he showed me. I'm not even sure he meant to do it. That's just how he did things. Easy, he made everything look easy.

So many times I rode with him out to the ranch where we stopped to talk to other workers who passed by in their pick-ups. There is a very strict farmer etiquette. It goes like this:

Drive up to one another.
Stop car. (maybe turn off engine).
Sit for a good 45 seconds.
Say three words.
Wait another 45 seconds.
Answer.

Conversation goes like this for as long as it takes the worker to tell the boss what is happening, the boss to tell the worker what to do and then, just as if no time has passed at all, the pick-ups continue rolling slowly down the gravel road. To say almost nothing but communicate *everything* is farmer etiquette.

In these farmer exchanges, I learned from Dad that business could always conclude with a solidifying handshake. And also, in Spanish. Hearing him speak

Spanish was something I never thought twice about until I discovered how he learned to speak Spanish. My grandfather employed men who came up from Mexico to do seasonal work. Slowly the seasonal work became year-round employment. Grandpa Harry even put some through school. It is known among the farming community that the men who work on the Nichols Ranch have been there for most of their lives. Some began working when they were 15. My father learned how to speak Spanish from working on the Ranch with the other 15 year-olds who drove tractor, truck, and moved sprinkler pipe.

Along with working with the crew at the Ranch, my father described to me the lonely hours he spent contemplating, evaluating, and worrying while running a disk back and forth over the fields. Much of his youth was spent this way. His father stuck him on a tractor at the young age of 12. He claimed he never understood his father and always feared the relationship he did not know much about. The one thing they could understand was the Ranch, and at times, that was all they had.

I know that my first experience being stuck on a tractor and told to “just do it” was completely different from Dad’s. He planned it that way. It was the summer after my first year of college. We were helping another farming father and son duo, long time friends, harvest their rice. We provided the trucking and they provided the harvesters and bank-outs. Bank-outs are big tractors that look like Tonka Trucks. They are the middlemen. They have big tires and all-wheel drive that can maneuver over levees and muddy rice fields. The job of these big machines is to drive out to the rice harvester as it is cutting, receive the rice from the spout, then carry it to the trailers waiting to be filled up and driven to the dryer. Bank-outs were what I was to learn how to operate that summer. Driving bank-out was my job and it scared me to death.

Even though I had been driving machinery ever since I could remember, I had always had Dad's sturdy hands close by as we scrunched into the cabs of tractors together when I practiced driving. Just because I had gone away to college didn't mean that I was ready to drive these big machines alone, but I didn't really have a choice. After much coaxing I was forced by Dad to muster enough bravery to receive a quick lesson with the different gears, an explanation about the all-wheel drive, and an overview of the spout controls. Dad made a few runs out to the harvester to demonstrate before he said, "Now you try." Reluctantly, I took control of the machine and looked him straight in the eye and said, "Stay here with me. Don't leave." After I drove only three feet, he said, "Oops, have to make a call," and jumped off the big yellow tractor leaving me to anticipate the harvester's rice capacity, receive the load, and unload the rice into a double-trailer semi. As I watched Dad's mischievous grin walk away from me towards his truck I could have killed him. But since I had no other choice and Denny, a 65 year-old farmer and a stickler for accuracy was waiting on my relief, I put the damn thing in gear and went for it.

I only remember looking back at his truck once and seeing him talking on his cell phone that rang more and more now that he had begun to expand his business. I watched him talk on the phone, appearing as if he wasn't even watching. As I pulled up to the harvester and the spout swung over to empty the rice into my bin, I was laughing at how absurd this was, how scared I was, and how there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. Amazingly, I took the load, stayed with the harvester and only spilled a little bit. I looked over at Denny, nervous for a reprimand, but he looked over at me, smiled and gave me a big thumbs up.

That was the first of many loads I would take in the bank-out throughout rice harvest that year. The pride and pure joy I saw in my father's eyes to have his daughter out there with the rest of the men operating heavy farm equipment was enough to keep me coming back until it was time for me to head back up to school in late September. That was the only summer I got to share in the magic of being a part of the collaborative efforts of being a farmer. Dad died suddenly of a rare heart condition, cardio-myopathy. It's common in athletes. It was the Tuesday after Memorial Day weekend, May 26th, 1998. He was 52.

E-ternal-Mail

"After Dinner"

Thursday, October 31, 1996

Corrie,

It has been a while since I sat down to type in a message to you. I think about doing it every day but somehow the information highway via phone and Mom seems to have been plenty active and the desire for your attention has already been achieved. But now you get to hear (or read) my version of life around here without your immediate presence.

First, the volleyball game. Tessa has become the anchor around which coach Melton and the Little Pantherettes (thought you wouldn't like that reference) have focused their success. She blocks, passes and serves a very consistent game. They go to the "one" set in the middle over half the time in hopes she can find a hole. By the end of the match, the other teams have begun to leave their center blocker there waiting for her. It makes the shot harder to make but usually she gets it over, although not too much steam on it and since they are all looking for it they get more successful returning them. Anyway, I know you would be both proud of her and frustrated that she doesn't have a more balanced offense around her so that she could be even more successful.

Now a little one-on-one. There isn't a day goes by that you are not in my thoughts. Most of the things that I do are things that I've always done (like harvest and go to meetings) and like before, many of them don't involve you. But it is still very different knowing that I won't get to see you when I get home or that I won't have the thrill of answering your current challenge. And that challenge could and would have been anything from watching you watch out for your mother as I

play with her lack of awareness, to you bringing your own awareness into the arena for debate. I miss it all. But that doesn't mean that I am sad you are away. Because the missing your presence comes along with a huge sense of pride and joy that you get to be you without us. It also means that we will get to meet and enjoy the new friends and significant others that join you in your new location. I'm really looking forward to seeing you and meeting some of those that have found being around you to be as fulfilling as I know it to be. Because I know what it is like to love you and all that you have come to be, I know that many others that get the chance to know you and experience your "awareness" will also miss you when you are away from them.

The rains came two days ago and we were unable to finish the bean harvest. There are two fields left to do, but neither one of them was ripe enough to harvest. It has been a long harvest season and we are almost finished. I am tired of doing the same routine of deciding what equipment should be doing what job, but that is my job and I'm pretty good at it and soon the rains will change the routine to trying to find some other reason not to do my desk work. Just a little more than a week and we'll be hugging you again.

Love,

DAD

Breakfast with Amber Scones

It must have been two, three days after. No I remember now, it was the Saturday after the funeral. A Saturday morning. On a Saturday morning we sat around the not-too-long-table in the dining room with the arched ceilings and ate breakfast, fruit scones and lattes. The Kopriva sisters were there. The Eastern-European noses that commonly butted their way into everybody's business were there to support their mourning sister—whose Eastern-European nose, in better times was capable of equivalent butting. Silence was not something the Kopriva women were known for. Silent they were not. My mother was with her sisters. I remember the two of them being almost the first to arrive. And it surprised me because I was never sure if they liked my father, but regardless, they were my mother's sisters and they were there. The three of them were together. Kathy, Christy, Connie. Kopriva. The first thing they bought after they had arrived was alcohol—GIN. Thank God for Gin. The martini, the martooni, the mar-fucking-make-it-better-i came startling soon in the afternoon during those first few days. Just a few hours after our breakfasts and the battle of the scones, the green gin bottle would be lifted and poured over the ice, cocktail onions, and olives. Thank God for the Kopriva sisters. And thank God for Gin.

On Saturday morning we opened the mail. But on this particular Saturday morning, as we had been doing for the last few days, we opened baskets and baskets of it. Baskets and Baskets. We're so Sorry...Condolences...For your heartache...At a time like this.... We sat there, my aunts opening each card and passing it along. Tessa sat quietly, as always. Everyone was so worried about her off with her friends, quiet, not crying. Only a few of us knew she was off with anyone who wouldn't ask her how she

was. I had to cover, cover for the Mom, cover for the sister, even cover for the dog. Yes we're okay, OKAY? They continued to open the mail.

Leaning back in my chair I watched my mother trying to choke down a dry scone. My stomach turned with the thought of bitter bread expanding on my own parched tongue and dry mouth, ripping its way down my esophagus to my upset stomach and then sitting for days on end in my tight and irritable intestines. *You need to eat*, she kept saying as she forced the brittle scone down, *In a time like this we need to make sure we keep our bodies healthy*. The aunts drank coffee more easily, eating fresh fruit in between their encounters with their own scones that seemed incredibly moist compared to my mother's at which she painstakingly pecked away. Mom methodically took a sip of latte after each attempt, sighing with relief that she managed to get it down. And then she would rest, until something forced her to try again. It's a good thing the Kopriva sisters were there or else that battle with the scone would have ruined us both.

I hear the women talking. They are reading the cards out loud. They announce who they're from, and what the sympathetic author who thought the world of my father had to say. I don't really hear them. I can't tell what they are saying. My chest starts to constrict and I can't breathe. It's hot in here, no it's fucking freezing. I want to shriek, *Stop eating the SCONE!* At last, Mom let the poor bread rest broken and ruined upon the plate. My breathing gets more and more shallow. I am alone. My life is not here. Do I even have a life? Part of what it used to be is lying dead in a funeral home. Or maybe it's sitting there on a shelf as ashes, already burned out of the tall, strong familiar shape I knew as my dad. My best girls came, the ones more commonly known as my B.G's,

Kira, Allison and Annemarie. Many of my friends came. Many who had been coached by my dad in basketball and many who hadn't but knew him. Dad made a point to know them all. But then, like him, they had to go. My life was not their life; they had their own lives. There were, after all, only three weeks left in spring quarter, well less now that it was the Saturday after the funeral, and they had gone to finish their own lives. The lives that were close to the life that I had just lost my grip upon. My boyfriend Nick had done the best his 19-year-old body and mind could do. He did a lot for me. Drove me home to Chico even after he broke up with me the night before we found out my dad had died. But he was young. I was too much. I put too much pressure upon him, somehow, whatever. Maybe he just fell out of love with me. Maybe. He was never really in love with me. We were young. I am alone. Tessa is taking refuge with her world, because if we combined our heartache it would surely destroy whatever selves we had left. She is with her friends, for her. My mother has her not so silent Kopriva sisters, for her. I can't breathe. I have nothing. I have nothing to do. I am standing alone naked in the middle of my own world with nothing to do. I am crying.

My mother stops trying to eat that damn scone and the aunts look up from their coffee and I say, *I have no friends here, I have nothing to do, I don't know what to do.* I know they hear me because for days I have been moping, searching, screaming for something to do with myself. I take care of everyone. Greet the long time family friends who look at me with so much sympathy I want to throw up. Make excuses for my heartbroken mother and sister, we're doing okay I answer to the constant outpouring of sympathy. The tears flow more easily now and they come faster. And the other women's tears resurface after a short lived stow-away as a chain reaction from mine. What do I do

with myself? What do I do? I look to my mother and the sadness in her eyes tells me that there is nothing she can offer me. It is so pathetic, I am so pathetic! You'd think I could handle this. A smart, white, middle class girl would be able to handle this, or maybe not. We haven't been through shit. I've been fucking spoon fed and now I'm sitting here with the feel of my dead father's cold flesh on my finger-tips when I touched the made up joke of a human the funeral parlor prepared for the viewing. I'm drowning into nothingness while seated at the table watching my mother have a life and death battle with her breakfast.

The mail again. An aunt grabs another card and it's a letter in a purple envelope from a long time friend of my father's. Addressed to, Chris, Tessa and Amber. The aunt opens it and reads, Dear Chris, Tessa, and Amber... Now there is a pause, Who the fuck is Amber? My mom is Chris, my sister Tessa, so that leaves only one other option, me. I'm Amber. Funny, I thought I was Corrie, but no, in this case I'm definitely Amber. Corrie has no friends here, Corrie isn't at college, Corrie doesn't even have a father anymore. So why not? Amber it is.

After the shock wears off my mother squeaks out, *Oh, she'd be so embarrassed if she knew she'd written the wrong name.* But it's no use. The aunts begin laughing first I think, little chuckles. Then Mom starts. My sister even cracks a smile before I realize what is going on. *Oh poor Corrie, she has no friends, no life, and people don't even know her name!* cackles an aunt. In a few seconds tears turn into hysterical laughter from the women around me. And I stop and I realize. This is so pathetic and awful there is nothing left to do but laugh. And it takes me a while, but I start. And I keep going and I

laugh. For the first time we all laugh again. And we laugh hard. And then the phone rings, and it's Kira, one of my B.G's, calling to check up on me and the laughter roars louder. *Oh, poor Amber does have friends!* shrieks one. *Stop the presses! Amber has a life!* chimes another. And I answer the phone and Kira asks what's so funny. And finally after taking a deep breath to calm my own hysteria I say, We're just opening our sympathy mail.

Wet Dog, Wet Dirt

It stinks. Of course it stinks. It carries wet dog around all day. My Dad's car. My Dad's 1985 Jeep Grand Wagoneer. We call it The Dog House. White with brown wood paneling on the outside. The tan leather of the interior is wrinkled, cracked and dried from hours baking in the hot sun. The back seat is folded up, making room for wet dog. Wet dog, dry dog, soon to be wet dog once he jumps into the next available irrigation ditch again. The dust disturbed from its peaceful rest by the passing of The Dog House swirls in the open windows rolled down to spare us death from the stink. Dirt. Mud. Dust. Weeds. Straw. Grease. Don't go riding in Dad's car if you're going someplace showered. It stinks, but with the open windows and cool air from the damp orchards, the stink doesn't bother me. Dad says our reward for riding in The Dog House is getting to turn on the air-conditioner. We have to leave the windows open, but at least we have cool air at our feet. My open window in the passenger seat is the gateway to the good smell of wet dirt and the soft cushion of air pushing my small hand up and down. If I point my fingers down, my hand plummets dangerously to the earth. It's saved from destruction when I raise my fingers upward and my hand shoots safely towards the sun. I spread my fingers and the air speeds through them allowing my hand to levitate against the puffs of wind carrying the scent of wet dirt. Dad sees my hand bouncing in the wind, but he doesn't let me know he's looking. I wonder if he smells the wet dirt too. Wet dirt, unlike wet dog, is a smell I love.

In the North Valley, in the summers, it's hot. So hot it feels like an oven when we get out of The Dog House to check the rice water or stop at the Richvale Café for lunch. When driving out the back roads, the only relief from the dry heat of the pavement is

when The Dog House passes by the almond, walnut, or prune orchards with the wet dirt. Farmers irrigate their orchards with sprinklers that shoot the water in between each of the heavy trunks or a drip system where the water silently trickles into the ground near each tree. The branches of the orchards shade the dirt, allowing it to stay wet longer in an orchard than an open bean field naked to the sun's heat. In the middle of summer it's hot early. And when we drive past the orchards, I can smell the sun already attempting to steal the night's water that lazily soaked into the soil hugging the tree roots. The sun can't help but bring some of the smell out from underneath the enclosed branches when it takes the moisture from the wet dirt. Wet dirt causes some to wrinkle their nose, but in The Dog House with open windows, I savor each breath with the sweet smell. As a farmer's daughter, smelling wet dirt is a luxury. But for a farmer, wet dirt is a way of life.

Great Expectations

“I don’t want to be a farmer.” She said it plainly and simply. But we both knew it wasn’t a plain or simple statement. My mom sat at the head of the table as the family held a conference about how to manage the Ranch since my dad’s death three days ago. At first I was pissed at her statement. She was going to throw it all away? After everything he did and accomplished and overcame she was going to get out of it just like that? I wanted to yell at her. But I looked closer at her eyes. Her red, sad eyes. I didn’t see a farmer. I saw a woman who was in love with a farmer, but didn’t want to be him. She had been through too much with him to fool herself into thinking she would want that life of early mornings, late nights and 24-hour worry. Dad’s sister Nancy quickly became my mom’s helpmate in strength and in sorrow. Nancy, like Grandma Sally, grew up in the farming business and though she was not married to a farmer, nor a farmer herself, she had taken the time to understand managing ranches and the intricacies of the strained relationship between her father and brothers. My mother and Nancy clung together like scared birds the first few days after he died. “John watched out for all the women in his life,” Nancy said through tears as we stood on the front porch of my house watching Grandma Sally pull away from the curb. She meant that he watched out for her and Grandma Sally as well as Mom, Tessa and me. It was scary now that he was gone. It scared them that his silent strong stature wouldn’t be standing in the corner to help them through this. And seeing mom and Nancy scared, scared me.

On the other side of my mom sat Joe, Dad and Nancy’s cousin. I was relieved that Joe had moved his family up to Chico a few years ago to start farming rice with my dad. They were interested in growing rice that could be marketed to Japan. The two of

them focused on special varieties that Dad learned to grow and Joe marketed. They had been working this business for a long while, establishing a strong group of growers able to provide enough product to sell to the Japanese. Before Joe moved to Chico, he always came up from San Diego to attend meetings or rice promotions. Joe was familiar, a friend, and my mom's eyes darted nervously between Nancy and Joe in the tension-filled air surrounding the not-too-long table.

Uncle Bill (Dad and Nancy's brother) fidgeted quietly next to me. I glanced over at him, wondering what he was thinking. Once I caught sight of Bill, I couldn't take my eyes off of his face. Suddenly I became aware of how much Bill's face resembled my dad's. The clenched jaw, the wrinkles at the corners of the blue eyes. The mannerisms too. How could I have missed this before? I watched his hands with the flat wide fingernails move around to the top of his head and mess up his hair. The way he rubbed his feet together after he left his work boots at the back door or leaned back in his chair and fumbled with a pen. Bill, now the next in line. The last of the Nichols men. The youngest. The one who got the shaft.

Bill fought for everything while thinking everything was robbed from him. Now Bill finally had his chance at being in control. Grandpa Harry never really retired from farming, ever. Dad became the manager of the row crops grown on the Nichols Ranch by creating his own LLC's. Through much persuasion, he convinced Grandpa Harry to continue his ownership of the land, but let Dad be the custom farmer by leasing the land from the Nichols Ranch. He created J. B. Nichols Inc., which employed the men, and Nichols Farming, which owned the equipment. By combining three different companies, he reduced liability on all sides and provided for more cost-effective farming. And Bill

hadn't been involved in any of it. My dad, because he was the oldest son—and because he and Bill didn't get along—got first shot at the opportunity to farm the ranch after Grandpa Harry. And now, finally, it was Bill's turn to be the head of the family. He could be the one to lead the family into financial success just as my dad had led the family out of financial debt left by Grandpa Harry. I saw it in his eyes. Sadness mixed with excitement for the long awaited opportunity to be in charge. He didn't smirk, nor did he smile. But I could see his eyes were satisfied with the thought of being needed. No one to get in his way of finally being the hero. Except for two. My mother and her trusty companion Nancy. Because Dad owned the equipment and his company managed the men, my mother was now the one in charge. And because Nancy rightfully owned one-third of the land, she had a say in who continued to farm the ranch. The problem in Bill's naturally taking over the duties of the Nichols men was that neither Mom nor Nancy trusted Bill with the responsibilities my dad had learned to manage. They couldn't communicate with him. He couldn't communicate with them. In fact, he could successfully communicate with very few people. The only people I've seen him engage in easy conversation with are his wife, daughter and son. Sitting next to Bill at the table, I suddenly realized that I couldn't remember a time when I actually saw him and my dad speak to one another. I knew there was tension. Dad's crabbiness and clenched jaw on the way to family functions was a helpful hint. But the reason for the tension was so well hidden, so well ingrained in every day life, that I never even thought to ask why it was there.

I looked at my mom, seated at the head of the table where my dad wouldn't have been sitting if he were still alive—because if he were here we wouldn't be in this

situation. I felt out of place. I had never been involved in the decision making before, but now, my mother needed my help in taking over a business she didn't want to have to be responsible for. My own heart sank when I realized I didn't want to be a farmer, either. I wanted the same luxuries I'd always had. I wanted the wet dirt without the way of life. No expectations. No demands. Just the trip out River Road whenever I wanted it. To let my hand dance carefree out the open windows of The Dog House. To show off to my friends the big tractors and fields I knew something about. To take the dog out for a run along the gravel road or ride with Grandma Sally on her Sunday drive.

Bill fumbled with words I couldn't focus on long enough to understand. He was talking about the beans still left to plant; about who would manage the men who had now survived two bosses. The men who worked their lives on the land owned by my family. They began by dragging their tired bodies back and forth across the border from Mexico to work for Grandpa Harry. Then bringing their families because they now had year-round employment and future employment opportunities for their sons. A.J., Frankie, Mario, Benjamin were second generation. Rosario, Sarafin, and Ramon were still first. A.J. and Frankie started working on the Ranch after they dropped out of school in the ninth grade. Yet they owned their own houses: *owned* them. And their children went to the same schools as Tessa and me. My dad was proud of them. Proud of their success. Proud of his company and proud of their working relationships. What was going to happen to them if my mother didn't want to be a farmer? That thought made me the most nauseous. You don't repay generations of physical labor on land with a "Sorry, we have to let you go." I knew for certain Dad would never have let that happen, but then he

shouldn't have gone and had a fatal heart condition. My cheeks grew hot with frustration. Right then, I hated wet dirt.

Bill continued talking and I still didn't know what he was saying. His words were about farming, but what about it? He'd grown his own rice with his son, my cousin Mike, for a long time now. They'd done a good enough job for themselves. But to me, Nancy, and Mom, they're not my dad. And Bill, though he owns one-third of land on the Nichols' Ranch and is the only male left, has to wait for his chance because of two women. His sister and his brother's wife. Something was always in the way. Was that why he was still talking?

As much as my mom feared the responsibilities of a farmer she was willing to take the risks because I don't think she was ready to let go just yet. It would be disrespectful to quit everything my dad worked for. I knew it and she knew it. She trusted the men as much as Dad did. They knew how to continue planting the beans. The rice was already in, there was no going back. But Joe was there. And even Bill. And close to one hundred other farmers who would drop everything if John Nichols' widow called asking for help. Because my dad was who he was, it was possible to be a farmer without him. She wasn't going to surrender the power of decision making to anyone and especially not Bill. Forced to accept the same responsibilities my dad spent his life mastering, she would at least continue with the rest of this season. Those same responsibilities that had created the strained and mysterious relationship between my dad, his brother, and father. For Dad, farming the Nichols Ranch was what he loved, but something that caused him great suffering. And my mom had been through all of it with

him. Seated at the head of the table with all eyes looking to her, she knew exactly what she was she was faced with and behind her red, sad, knowing eyes lay her fear.

Sept. 28, 1981

Dad and Mom,

Over a month ago you sent me a letter to which I haven't given a reply. I want to do that now because I feel a reply in writing is appropriate.

It has been no secret that my health has been poor for several years. It hasn't been a pleasant experience for anyone. It might have been easier if some identifiable disease had been diagnosed and treatment prescribed. Fortunately, I have no diseases. Unfortunately, I have had a stressful condition to which a cure is only attainable through slow reconstruction of better living conditions. My stress condition had gotten to a point where my body reacted physically in all kinds of dysfunction. Hence, the search for disease. My condition has a label called "anxiety neurosis" and I probably developed levels to the point of chronic. This only means that my daily efforts have been drastically impaired by my physical saturation of uncontrolled anxiety. Since February of this year, I have been getting the help of a psychiatrist. His therapy has begun to produce results with which I can be very comfortable. I have achieved a level of existence which seems very normal. I sleep, eat and defecate regularly. Sounds silly, but after not being capable of these functions for long periods of time, you become very appreciative of their presence. Now the task at hand is to build upon these meager achievements without disruption.

My job of running the Nichols Ranch is a huge part of my life and always has been. You folks were older when it (the ranch) dominated your time and efforts. On the other hand, I have never known any other life style. I have made several efforts to become a part of the farming operation throughout my young adult life. This is proof enough to me that I enjoy it and want to continue being active in its operation. Just how to do this is the question at hand. I don't think that I should now be making efforts in my own behalf. I suppose I should go out on my own and start from nothing and make it all for myself, by myself. This is not realistic, nor has it ever really been consistent with your plans. So now we must be honest. I can continue to operate and represent your farm within the bounds of your guidance and at the same time develop a complimentary operation which will work as an efficient tool toward transferring your farming operation into my financial burden and reward.

As with every endeavor, there are several areas of conflict which must be identified. The most obvious is the conflict of interest which develops when my reward is measured disproportionately over projects which have equal demands for attention. Therefore, I recommend that my compensation for managing your operation be more directly attached to the net earnings. I also recommend that the men and equipment used on my leases be kept under the control and management of Nichols Ranch Inc., and that I pay on account for their use as the crop year progresses. This should save great amounts of complication at least until the proportionate share of my endeavors becomes more significant.

My next recommendation is probably still the crucial item. I recommend that I be named "the boss" of Nichols Ranch Inc. This can be in any form necessary so that there

is no confusion as to who is responsible. There will definitely have to be limitations to the "power" granted such a position and a schedule of regular board meetings so that decisions can be made without undue delay. My reasons for making this recommendation are numerous. The most obvious benefit of such action is that I can honestly deal with the reality that I am responsible for all work done and not have the excuse that someone else should be getting this or that accomplished. I can see where this request leaves both of you fearing the state of uselessness and not being needed or even worse, not being wanted. I can only state that I always had great respect of my elders and have always valued their knowledge and abilities. It isn't always obvious that I'm giving that information due consideration because as our history shows, I'm often already pressed for time and changing methods usually creates delays in other operations or schedules. The solution is to have better advance communication to eliminate the desire to change courses mid-stream. . . .

After the family meeting around the table, Mom, Joe and I climbed into the car to make the trip out the ranch to tell the men that she decided to plant the rest of the beans and keep them employed for at least the rest of the year. All she could promise them was employment for the rest of the season. Joe helped Mom into the back seat making sure she got all her limbs in before he closed the door. I climbed in next to her and shut the door for myself. My mom suddenly looked 80 years old, fumbling with her seat belt and struggling to get her feet situated on the other side of her purse. She looked sick. Her tongue searched her mouth for the moisture that had disappeared since Dad died. She leaned her head back on the seat behind her and closed her eyes from the morning sun as

it heated up the late spring day. Joe gently rolled the car forward beginning our first journey out to the ranch without Dad. Why I was going on this mission to solidify my mom's position as the one in charge in the eyes of the men, I didn't know. I watched the trees go by in a blur. I watched the parallel rows of the orchards shift angles as the car slid smoothly around the turns of River Road. Mom reached over and squeezed my hand. Looking into my eyes, she couldn't say how sorry she was that I wouldn't have my dad for the rest of my life, but her sympathy made me nauseous. *We have business to do*, though I squeezed her hand back and gave her the same sympathetic look she gave me. But her eyes were closed again. She couldn't bear to look out at the familiar road she drove with my dad. And I was irritated at her sorrow. I turned to the window again and saw the red brick house pass by as the car slowed. My mom made a gasping sound and tears streamed down her face. Joe heard her and replied, "This first trip is going to be the toughest." But it was not the first trip. I'd done this thousands of times. My stone cold face masked the sorrow that I felt for myself knowing the ride in The Dog House wouldn't ever happen again. And I got scared because his car was out there, and I didn't want to see it yet.

As we slowly progressed down the gravel road, I thought about the men who were in a worse place than I was. They'd already made the first trip the day he died. They were still working, unsure as to their employment but they were there, and they were even driving in The Dog House. Someone had to drive it out to the ranch and out if its backed-in place in the driveway to our home. We got out of the car and met Mel, the man whom my mom had decided would manage the ranch for the season. She chose Mel over Uncle Bill because my dad told her Mel was the one who should take over if

anything happened to him. This was said in private many years before when my mom began to realize the complexity of his farming business. Mel worked for my grandpa and for my dad. He wasn't a stranger and he wasn't family and all my mom had to go on was a conversation of "what ifs" ten years before.

The men were prepared for us to arrive. They stood in the big warehouse known as "The Shop;" the aluminum structure tall enough to house the farm equipment needing to be worked on by Frankie, the mechanic. The huge doors slid open and when Mom got out of the car she walked up to each man and hugged him, crying. She was making this so dramatic, although I also gave some of the men hugs. We stood in a big circle. My back was to the inside of the shop while Mom, Joe, and Mel stood facing me.

Interspersed between us were pensive sets of brown eyes. Dirty work boots shifted uneasily.

As Mom spoke, she managed not to weep. Suddenly she was a business woman. She explained that Mel was in charge. They should only take instruction from him or from her. If there was any discrepancy, she was to be called. "We will plant the rest of the beans," she said. "I haven't decided what to do about the ranch permanently, all I can tell you right now is that things will continue as much the same as possible for the rest of the season." After those words, it seemed a bit of the tension in the air broke away and Mom was able to express thanks and convey my dad's long admiration of each of them.

Throughout the short meeting I stood quietly in the back, feeling out of place, but wanting to be there to help my mom and show my support. I was relieved that at least we didn't have to decide everything right then. I watched my mom stand looking around at the men. Her ability to look so put together even then amazed me. For the first time

since my dad's death I recognized her as the woman I knew as my mom. Never did she want to be a farmer, yet she was one.

"Getting back into the swing."

Wednesday, April 1, 1998

Hey Dad,

Things have popped right back into chaotic busyness again. I have decided to still run for the student senate and I am applying for the summer program in Salamanca, Spain, I am playing ultimate frisbee, which is so fun, and Rhaetia and I are designing props for a show at the Lord Leebrick Theatre in town, and I have seventeen units. Hard classes but I think very great. So in an odd way I have a rational grasp upon every thing I'm doing, but I still feel as if someone has tied a belt around my chest and I can't quite get in enough air to relax completely. Once again I am proving with authority that Corrie has absolutely no way of finding a happy medium. But the intensity of all these things will come in waves so hopefully they will crash at different times. I had a very hard time getting on that train and saying goodbye to you that night. I just don't know what overwhelms me so much that I hate to leave my family. I had a long talk with mom about how it's been two years now and I still have a hard time feeling 100% about my position here in Oregon. I know that sometime we can never feel 100% about where we are, we'll always doubt. But I do think that we can take some measures to see if where we are is the right place for us. Like taking some time and going someplace else. . . .

I'll just keep on plodding through all of the stuff I always get myself involved in, and I realize that I am much happier busy than stagnant. The trick is for me to not worry so much about failing at these things. I can do it and I can even do a good job. Sometimes I get thoughts like I am wasting myself here in Oregon, I need a place where I am going to make a big influence. You know, I just realized that the reason I take myself so seriously is because I really think I

have been sent to this earth to impact it some serious way. The frustrating part is I don't know how. So I think I need something bigger and brighter so my mission will come more easily. Do you see what I do to myself? How many people do you know who expect that they'll be famous (somehow) and worry that they're not doing enough to make that happen? ☺

Thanks for reading my processes of rationalization. It always helps to know that someone will be witness to my thoughts, because then I'll know if they're legit or not. I love you very much. Even when you try to get under my skin with threats to women's rights to play basketball and women's rights to cry when they need to for no other reason than it feels good. I still know I'm right and you're wrong and that inside we both know the same truth, no matter what spin we each interpret.

I'll talk to you soon. Now, don't get overwhelmed with stuff to do, because you can do it all, and you can do it all well.

Love,

Corrie

"Why? Why Not?"

Thursday, April 2, 1998.

So there I was, driving tractors on my family's farm and sitting all those hours daydreaming about how I could be the most respected person in the world and every person alive would know that as they listened to my words of leadership, they would feel assured that all would be well.

Now I go to meetings and I wait for the right time for me to make my "statement of summation of the facts" as I see them so that everyone will know that this is the way it should be and so it will be done. My point is I haven't come to the place in my life where I'm not seeking to have an impact on the outcome of the current situation. It may not be too far away for me, but for you it can't be on the horizon yet. It was a long road from the tractor seat to President of Associated Rice Marketing Cooperation and all the other ten to twenty board positions that have come along with the package of being a leader. There were a lot of growth stages along the way. Some good moments and several bad experiences have marked the journey. I expect your journey to have some of each also. I also expect that your journey will find you confronting the whole of your potential and wondering why in the world you have bitten off such a big load. It just happens. And piece by piece you learn where you feel the most comfortable. There will be days that you'll wish you were not in such a position of impact and wishing that the incompetent fool that you replaced would or could take back their previous status and let you have back your frustration with THEIR performance. Your frustrations of today are the indications that you have a full journey ahead of you with lots of energy to battle the challenges ahead. I would be more concerned if you were expressing a feeling of "life is great, I don't want anything to change."

Let your "tractor" time be just what it has to be. Let your appetite for becoming more powerful develop and you won't be able to stop the feeding process that will ensue. Do you realize how many students are NOT RUNNING for the student government in the world?

After you left on the train that night, I came home and played at the dumb computer until 4am, I couldn't sleep after seeing that train leave without me.

Love,

DAD

May 26, 1998

“Morning Corrie, how’s it going?” my roommate Rhaetia sits at the head of my bed, waking me up at 6:00 a.m. It’s May 26, 1998. I fail to notice that she’s been crying. Waking me up at six o’clock in the morning isn’t unusual, we’re always the ones up early in the apartment we share with five other people. My tiny room is attached to the kitchen in the very back of the seven-bedroom unit that used to be an office building. “My life could be better,” I say dryly coming out of sleep. I can’t remember if I told her that Nick, my boyfriend of a year broke up with me the night before because of his confused feelings for Brooke, another girl who lived in the same dorm with us last year. Rhaetia either doesn’t answer or gives me a meaningful, “I’m so sorry.” I don’t notice she actually means it.

“There’s someone here to see you,” she immediately says. “Really?” I ask and look to the doorway to see my dad’s long time friend Bill Yonge, standing there with a smile I’m not awake enough to realize is fake. “Hey there,” he says entering my room. “It’s a little early for a visit, don’t you think?” I ask, sitting up in bed giving him a hard time. He and my dad are great friends, having been basketball coaches for many years in Chico. Bill and his wife Julie now live in Bend, Or., and Rhaetia and I have gone to visit them a few times since we’ve been at school in Eugene. Rhaetia quietly leaves the room and Bill sits down at the foot of my bed and says, “I didn’t come here to visit.” His narrow face with small, thinly framed, round glasses is serious and solemn. “I need you to listen to me. I have something very important to tell you.” He pauses, both waiting for my attention and to muster enough courage to say what he came here to say. I sit up fully awake and look in his eyes. A flash of worry about my family courses through me,

especially for my mom and sister. A moment passes of complete silence as I brace myself. “Your mom called us real early this morning,” he pauses and looks into my eyes, “Your father passed away last night.” Bill went on, saying something about my dad having a had a heart attack, but the words before those hit me instantly. I lurch forward and clutch to him and say, “No, no, no...” Tears. Shaking. Then after the first, “Really?” I shake. I lean back against the wall, dry eyed. My heart is beating in my throat. So hard I don’t know what to do with it. I lean back against the wall and feel my heart beat and I shake. In my disbelief I look to the doorway and see Nick and Rhaetia embrace, hugging each other through their own tears. I look back to Bill. I start asking a ton of questions. How? What happened? What time? A heart attack? I can’t believe this part. After years worrying that he wouldn’t make it back from the ranch late at night, he has a heart attack? But I wasn’t prepared for this one. I never worried about this. He’s an athlete. He’s tall and thin. Besides, I don’t have a *father*, I have a *dad*. *My* dad. You must be wrong because fathers aren’t wonderful people like my dad. Fathers are powerful heads of families, not understanding friends who I call to talk about personal things, who I send e-mail to, who listens to me and then lets me decide on my own.

My thinking is rational. Overly calm, overly rational. My questions are ones Bill can’t answer. He says, “You need to call your mom, she’s waiting to hear from you.”

“I can’t.”

“She really needs you to call her,” he keeps saying.

“I can’t, I need a minute.” I couldn’t call her. Because calling her, calling down to Chico meant it was true. I couldn’t call her. Not yet.

"Daily Report"

Thursday, April 10, 1997

Corrie,

Well, it's 8:30 am and I'm waiting for Grandma to get ready so that I can take her to the ranch with me because my "Dog House" broke down again and I've been driving the "Tootsie Taxi." She wants it back so that she can get out to the ranch herself. I think taking Tootsie to the ranch is one of the outings that she looks forward to several times a week. She always says that it is a chore, but if you try to do it for her, she puts you off unless of course you take her along.

The rice fields are dryer than usual and the preparation for planting is ahead of schedule. If it doesn't rain in the next 10 days, we will have all the planting work done and be a full two weeks ahead of normal planting time. The question most growers are wondering is whether or not to plant that early or just wait until the temperatures warm up. The probability is that some will wait and others will plant, which will spread out the harvest to some extent and that is good for the dryers. I keep having the image of you and Rhaetia driving the bankouts for harvest this summer. With the two of you it would be less like work and more fun and probably a little more disruptive to the process but the entertainment factor would be worth it. The sports page noted that Chico State's track team is at Eugene for your invitational meet. Maybe you could make an ass of yourself and cheer for Chico!

Go to go now. Love,

DAD

Sally G. Nichols

She woke up with the familiar burden of having to go to the bathroom. Her eighty years didn't help her naturally small bladder from continually filling and resting uncomfortably full as it pressed against her lower abdomen. Rolling over, she thought she heard the familiar sounds of Harry putting on his work boots. How had he risen without her waking? She sighed with the thought of making his breakfast. She hated to cook. Always had. She wasn't that bad at it, it just bored her. It was a chore. Runny eggs and bacon with black coffee. The joy of cooking was not a joy she took part in. But Harry was already up and probably getting the dogs in the back of the truck, so she had to hurry.

Opening her eyes, she realized she was in her single bed, not the king size one she and Harry had shared for the 50 years of their marriage. John and Bill had moved the larger bed out of her room at her request after Harry died five years ago. What did she need that big bed for anyway? It was impractical and impractical things bothered her. Tootsie, her yellow lab, had been walking around in the kitchen, hence the confusion of Harry getting ready to go to work. *Humph*, she scolded herself. Stupid to be confused by that. She looked over at the clock, 2:17 a.m. Too bad it wasn't a few hours later. Then she could just get up. She thought of her pre-poured bowl of grape-nuts at her single place setting at the kitchen table. At least she didn't have to cook anymore.

She couldn't remember a night she slept all the way through since she had developed diabetes in her late thirties. Luckily the condition wasn't severe, she just needed to be disciplined when it came to her sugar intake, which she monitored through food. This wasn't much of a problem. She liked her coffee black, her breakfast at 7:30 a.m., lunch at noon and dinner around 6:30 or 7:00 p.m. No snacking, it just wasn't

practical to eat when you weren't hungry. Tomorrow's Sunday, she remembered. Maybe she would call one of the granddaughters to take her and Tootsie for a drive out to the Ranch. But she had never called them before. She surprised herself at thinking about it at all. She never asked anybody for anything. *John might stop by*—her heart sank. How could she have forgotten that too? She could feel that ball of hurt forming in her chest. *Damn it.*

Her bladder pressed harder at her abdomen. She threw the covers off with her right hand and pulled her legs up. But oddly, only her right leg came up. She felt a little dizzy and tried to prop herself up on her elbows but couldn't move her left arm. She reached over herself to feel the left side of her body. It was there. Her right hand was touching it, but she couldn't feel anything on the left side of her body. *It's just a little numb from being asleep. No need to call anyone. I'll just see if I can't get up to go to the bathroom.* She managed to pull herself out of bed, stand up and grasp the nightstand attached to the wall. She could get her left leg to move some and to hold a little weight, but her left hand was twisted and clenched into a fist she couldn't undo. Her head felt dizzy now that she was standing and she couldn't remember why she had stood up at all. She thought to turn around and rest on the bed, but couldn't see the bed anymore and didn't know where she was. Her knees felt weak. Letting go of the nightstand, she managed to step in the direction of the bed before she lost all sight and balance. Falling forward, her knees hit the ground just before her arms hit the bed. She clutched onto the sheets with her right hand and achingly pulled herself up so her hips, at least, rested on the bed. *Damn it*, she thought. *Damn, damn, damn.* She couldn't move, couldn't open her mouth to yell, and didn't have any idea that something had gone terribly wrong.

Stranded, alone, and lying half-way on the bed, she knew enough to feel the tears roll down her cheeks and her nightgown soak with the warm liquid in her tiny bladder.

* * * * *

“I can snow ski. I don’t love it but I can do it,” she told Harry before they were married. Harry loved to snow ski. And water ski. And sail. She liked to sail, too, especially with Harry. In the two years that they had been married, Sally and Harry spent time at her family’s cabin on the north shore of Lake Tahoe. It was the beginning of January, in 1944, and they planned to go snow skiing for the afternoon. Sally’s sister, Ann, was there with her two-year-old daughter Lynn, while her husband was over-seas during the war. After getting the car packed with warm clothes, skis, boots with canvas bindings, and an ice-chest with roast beef sandwiches (Ann and Sally argued over who would have to make them), Harry drove Sally and Ann to the mountain to ski.

Sally stood a tiny 5’1 to Harry’s 6’3” build. It was safe to say that he was a big guy and she was a tiny lady. But she wasn’t that tiny. Her dark hair rimmed her small square face. Her lips were full and her eyes blue with dark lashes that made the blue stand out even more. She didn’t say much, didn’t gossip or small talk, there just wasn’t sense in it. She was private, but if asked would gladly tell or at least say a polite, “I don’t think that’s any of our business, do you?” And she was in love with Harry.

Once Harry had maneuvered a parking space close enough that the ice-chest in the back of the car was accessible, the three headed to towards the ski lifts. Sally and Ann and their youngest sister Jane had grown up snow skiing. They knew exactly what

to do, but Ann, more athletic than Sally, was a bit more advanced. However, when they went to the mountain to ski, Ann and Sally always skied together. In line for the ski lift, Ann ran into two friends from Chico she hadn't seen since she married Carl and moved to Washington, so she decided to ski with them for the afternoon, leaving Harry and Sally to take the lift together. Harry was a risk taker. And Sally, already struggling to gracefully maneuver skis too large for her petite frame, was not. At least not in this instance. Harry liked to push the envelope just a little, and besides that, he was a great skier. Wanting Sally to take some risks and accompany him to the very top of the mountain, he pleaded, if not ordered her to continue up with him instead of getting off at her usual, comfortable spot, mid-way up the mountain. Since it was just the two of them skiing together, Sally said, "Oh Harry, you know, I'd really rather not. This is far enough for me." But Harry, willful and demanding, coaxed Sally, who was very much in love with him, to the top of the hill.

Sally rarely got nervous. But this time, looking down at the little mounds of white snow strategically placed on various sides of the few trees, felt her stomach fly away from her and her heart in her throat. *This is silly*, she thought. *I can do this*. Harry, with his eyes glistening for the thrill of speeding down the mountain felt his stomach full of excitement and his legs twitching to push off from the plateau where they stood looking down. But Sally, still gazing down at the steep slope suddenly became paralyzed with fear. *This is silly*, she thought again. *I definitely can not do this*.

"Come on Sally, push off," Harry demanded, but push off she did not. "Let's go!" he shouted at her. "Just don't look down." But Sally didn't move. Her fear slowly started to turn into resentment for her husband, whom she loved very much, but at this moment

very much did not. *I didn't want to be up here in the first place*, she fumed. *If you didn't force me to come up higher than I wanted to we wouldn't be in this situation.* Suddenly she started to remember all the times when she'd cooked dinner, much to her dislike, and waited on Harry for hours only to find out later that he had been down having an ice-cream cone. She remembered the times he forgot to call to tell her he couldn't make it to the dinner party on time and she would sit, patiently waiting and do the cross-word never getting angry. But now, as she stared down the mountain, she realized it was all too much. The heat rose from the base of her stomach up through her arms and chest and shoulders making everything tingle and hot. The heat closed her throat so she could barely breathe and as it rose through her face to the top of her head, she felt little pricks behind her eyes while her clear blue eyes became the hottest of all. Before she could remember what it felt like to cry, since she hadn't done it since she was a very little girl being told she was going to be sent off to boarding school with her sisters, she found herself sitting on the back of her skis, with her face in her hands and tears streaming down her cheeks. If she could have seen the look on Harry's face, it might have made her feel better: for he looked upon her with the stunned expression only pure astonishment can produce. Never had Harry seen Sally cry. Ann was the only other person who had witnessed the phenomenon, and that's only because she was sitting next to Sally in the backseat of the car when their parents told them about being sent away. So astonished was Harry at the sight of his wife's tears that he stood over her, frozen. But before he could do anything, Sally had composed herself, wiped the liquid from her eyes and stood up defiantly. A few moments passed. Neither husband nor wife spoke, nor did they look at each other, but Harry, finally coming to, bent down and undid his bindings

first, then his wife's, took both sets of skis in one arm and Sally's hand in the other and carefully helped her to walk down the mountain.

* * * * *

She woke with a start. She knew her eyes were open but she couldn't see anything. And then slowly, images started to appear on her right side. Her son, Bill, and her granddaughter, Corrie. She heard her daughter's voice, but she couldn't see her. It was coming from somewhere behind her, or to the left, she couldn't tell. She felt a cool metal frame on her right and latched her hand to it. Something caught her attention, someone was shouting her name. It was a lady with dark hair in a white coat. "Sally? Sally? Can you hear me?" Yes, she could hear her. "Squeeze my hand if you can hear me." The lady helped her release her grip on the metal frame and asked again, "Squeeze my hand if you can hear me." Sally did. Then heard a roar of enthusiasm. "Can you point to your son?" She raised her arm in the direction of Bill. "And your granddaughter?" She moved it to the right in front of Corrie. "Good. Very good. Now can you point to your daughter, Nancy? Where's Nancy?" She could hear her. "I'm right here, Mom," Nancy said standing on her left side and holding her left hand which was clenched into a fist. Her eyes searched for Nancy, wildly they shot around the room. But Sally couldn't find her. Everything disappeared at the middle of her body leaving only infinite darkness towards the left. The lady let go of her right hand and Sally immediately turned to find the cool metal she had grasped before. She closed her eyes, tired from all the shouting and embarrassed at her failure. Everything confused her and

she didn't know where she was. But she did know things were not right. And that things were far from being okay. She was scared. What had happened? That unfamiliar feeling of moisture pricked at the back of her eyes again. Her heart sank. Things were far from okay. Slowly her breathing deepened and she fell asleep, her hand loosened its grip on the metal frame of the bed and dropped limply to her side.

* * * * *

"I still have all those pictures to put together," I said quietly and selfishly to myself when my mom told me that Grandma Sally had a severe stroke on Halloween night and was in the hospital. We stood in front of our house after our walk in the park with the looming oak trees. My mom explained that she had waited to tell me about Grandma's stroke until she heard back from Nancy how serious it was. Looking at my mom—I had grown accustomed to judging the depth of her sorrow in the past five months since Dad died—I knew there would be no more afternoons compiling the pictures in Grandma's darkroom. I thought immediately of the pictures. Grandma Sally was a photographer and over the years had accumulated boxes full of images she captured with her camera. After Dad died I decided to move back to Chico for the year and help my family. I enrolled in two classes at Chico State and focused on making up the five incomplete classes I still had at the university in Eugene from spring quarter.

With my life now in Chico mourning the death of my dad, picking up the pieces of his business and deciding what to do with the remains, I began a picture project with my Grandma. I arranged to come over twice a week in the afternoons to help her put

names on the pictures of people only she remembered. Before we started we took a trip to the local stationary shop downtown to get labels and picture albums. Grandma's children had decided she shouldn't drive anymore, so she handed me the keys and explained that we could take her car but that the lock was stuck: if we couldn't get it open we would have to take my car. Walking into the garage and opening the door to the already unlocked car to help Grandma get in, her face washed with embarrassment. "I don't know why I couldn't get the car unlocked earlier," she said. Her bewilderment was plagued with an overwhelming sense of shame. I told her it was no big deal, not realizing her discomfort until I glanced over to her as we stopped at a red light. Her hands sat plainly in her lap, her purse was on the floor and her ankles crossed. Her blue eyes still shone from beneath the glasses and dark brows though her hair had long since turned white. But her dark brows were wrinkled and her lips slightly pursed. "I must be very stupid," she said. Wondering what she was talking about, I turned to look at her and realized she was still thinking about the unlocked car. "Don't worry, this stuff happens all the time. Besides, I won't tell anyone," I said. She smiled meekly, fully aware I was humoring her.

We rode to the stationary store in silence, as we spent most of our time. Grandma Sally never asked about my life. She didn't make small talk, and her ability to not speak about things frustrated me even more now that my dad, her son, was dead. Once inside the store, we found the photo albums and chose two. I thought we should get more, but Grandma didn't think that was necessary. I grew frustrated with her slow reactions and her incoherence. At the counter she had trouble communicating with the clerk. As I looked across the store, my eyes met with the woman who my mom, Tessa and I went to

see for “grief counseling.” I said hello and she smiled. One unpleasant aspect of small towns is meeting your therapist out and about. Grandma had no idea I was looking at the woman trying to help me through the “grief” of my dad’s death, which was fine with me. She would have said therapists were “impractical” anyway. I’m not convinced I would disagree.

One afternoon as we worked on one of the albums, we came across many pictures of my dad as a little boy. Struck by the innocence I saw in his eyes as he climbed over tractors at the age of six and drank Coke out of the bottle in a bean field, I wondered: Did he ever think he would die at 52?. The sadness overwhelmed me, but it wasn’t my own. I was sad for him. I knew he didn’t want to leave us all. Why had he gone? I looked to my grandma for help. She was his mom. What did she think? As tears welled in my eyes, she didn’t notice. She said, “John’s pile goes over here.” My heart dropped. How could she look at these pictures of her son who had died a few months ago without breaking into pieces? I wanted her to be the one to comfort me, to at least show emotion. Even though Grandma had never done that for her own children, I wanted her to do that for me. I thought losing my dad might make her let down her guard about being independent and “fine,” her token answer to everything.

I never saw Grandma Sally cry. The day my dad died, it came in a fleeting moment, then it was gone. The front door to our house opened and Grandma and Janet, her house cleaner and companion, entered. I hadn’t seen Grandma since I had arrived from Oregon. Later my mom told me that Grandma was so worried about me finding out about Dad away from home, and how I was going to get back. This surprised me. But as she shuffled unsteadily through the door and our eyes met, she hurried to hug me and I

heard her gasp out a couple of sobs as I bent down to hug her. My own sobs resurfaced and we clung to each other for one still moment. And then just as suddenly as it came, that emotion, that vulnerability, in her was gone. And I never saw it again, except for moments of unbearable helplessness as she spent two months in the hospital going in and out of consciousness before she finally died on the morning of December 18th, 1998, seven months after she lost her son.

Simple Tragedy

The world keeps on going and there are moments when I become part of it.
I try to make sure *my* world keeps on going,
I can envision the danger in keeping it all so together.
I have wondered what death is—
What death means—
I don't care on one hand,
on the other it becomes so important that it consumes my body—
encompassing every inch, filling each corner, cold, thick.
I sit down and I say to myself, *Feel, let it all sink in.*
But it sounds like someone else's story—
not mine.
I pour oil into water—
it doesn't mix—
it doesn't fit—
the water sits steadily below,
sinking underneath with the heavy reminder that something isn't okay.
How simple it is.
I wonder how long it will take me to lose perspective again.
To get caught up in the rat race—
searching, screaming, fighting for the simplicity that tragedy provides.
The fear of being swept up and blinded by—
the dust storm.
Still I let go,
failing to see the simplicity of tragedy.
Because I'm in deep already—
in way too deep—
but not deep enough that I remain simple.
Simplicity is peaceful,
tragedy, simple.

Post Harvest Party

It's February 26th and it's cold outside. I haven't yet reached the 26th of any month without marking its significance as the anniversary of another month passing without seeing my dad. Mom planned a party for today. The very last post harvest party. Mom and Nancy decided to sell the ranch. Uncle Bill wants to farm it, but Mom and Nancy don't want to own the land he is responsible for. So he will buy them out. From what Mom has said of the process, it hasn't been pleasant. The meetings with the estate attorneys go on forever and Grandma's death in December created more to deal with. The sale won't be complete until the middle of next season, so Mom and Nancy have decided to let Bill go ahead and farm the upcoming 1999-2000 year while the paper work moves like molasses.

Mom's holding an auction in March. Because my dad took over control of the Nichols Ranch, he bought all the equipment from Grandpa Harry. She'll sell everything. All the tractors, cars, and tools, everything. Leaving Bill to scramble around with the other patrons trying to buy his family's equipment out from under him. It sounded cruel when she told me about the auction. Cruel to me, to Bill, to the men at the ranch, cruel to my dad and grandpa. It was like digging up the graves of farming past. Resurrecting the spirits of the old ways, and then letting them go uncherished and unremembered. But since my mom is no longer going to be a farmer she has no other choice, she has to sell it. She offered to sell it all to Bill, but he doesn't want to pay for *everything*, just *some* things.

Growing up, my sister and I spent our afternoons at the ranch on the piles of equipment stored behind and around the shop. Dad and Grandpa never threw anything away. The car my dad drove when he met my mom, a little white convertible TR4, sat under a camper trailer next to old 1940 Ford pick-ups, discarded disking-tows, tractor tires, and forklifts. Most of metal in the piles was rusted and molded into tools I could no longer identify after they'd been stripped of usable parts before they were laid to rest in the rows behind the shop.

When I was eight, the line of equipment with the TR4 was my favorite one to play in. Field 16 extended out from behind the TR4 and wooden risers were piled high at the border of the bean field. Somehow, it was always cool by the TR4. The shade provided by the abandoned cars and tractors had an eerie knowledge of what once was. There were stories in the cracked windshields of the Ford trucks and the enormous tractor tires strewn about. But the best part, the most exciting for me and my sister, was the hunt for the lizards lounging in the cool shaded hideouts provided by the graveyard of machinery.

One afternoon, after we checked the water in the rice fields Dad leased in Richvale, and stopped for lunch at the Richvale Café, Dad drove the twenty minutes towards the West, back to the Nichols Ranch where he had to check on a job A.J. and Mario started that morning. Dad entered the office on the side of the shop while Tessa, me and D.B. (our lab) ventured around behind the shop in the direction of the equipment burial ground. D.B. stopped for water after his run from River Road to the shop while Tessa and I continued on around towards the TR4.

We became primal hunters during the hour Dad was doing business in the office. Coordinating our movement once we spied tiny scaly claws or a quick darting reptilian

tongue. Once the lizard was spotted, everyone froze, including the lizard, aware of our presence before we were aware of it. Tessa waved her hand and pointed, indicating she had one cornered. Then, I came around the back while she moved toward it in slow motion. The tension built once we closed to less than a foot away from the lizard and Tessa and I made silent eye contact, conveying who went in for the grab. Since I was behind it, she stopped, giving me the go-ahead for the reach in. We held our breath and the lizard amazingly didn't move even though my hand was just inches from its tail. Tessa looked at me telling me to hurry up and grab it and my hand darted at the lizard, enclosing its fat little belly between my fingers. We caught one. But managed only to hang onto it long enough to get bored of having it in our possession before it leaped from our hands scurrying into the cool hidden maze of shade.

And in March, twelve years after that day, Mom is going to sell it all. Where will the lizards go? I ask Tessa as we drive out River Road together to attend the last post harvest party. She smiles meekly at me, not wanting to think about it. With D.B. in the back of the car yelping as we near the turn, I slow and easily make the right turn onto the gravel road leading to the shop. We roll along slowly with D.B., barking from the back of the car with an old dog rasp because his arthritis makes it impossible for him to run the half mile to the shop anymore. Everything looks the same. The dirt from the fields to my left is turned, dark and moist, even though the weather is cold. The orchards owned by the farmer next to us on the right look the same and we pass the weathered sign, "Slow, No Dust." Tessa gazes out her passenger window and we ride in silence until we reach

the shop where Mom and the rest of the family: Bill, cousin Mike, Nancy, Joe and all the men are gathered around tables with food from the local Mexican restaurant, Ricardo's.

The mood is light, but somberness floats all the way up to the high ceilings of the aluminum building. Mike exerts enough energy to make up for the lack of it showed by Tessa and me, and I breathe a sigh of relief knowing he will purposely provide most of the conversation, producing enough bullshit so no one has to talk about what's on our minds. Mike is the only grandchild to go into farming and he will help farm the Nichols Ranch once Bill buys it. Coolers are full of beer and Coke, and space heaters are roaring at the chill. No speech is made, no announcement that this is the last day of employment for the men Bill can't afford to hire back for next season. Most of us sit at different tables and converse lightly with those who speak English. We eat politely and enjoy ourselves. Soon the food is gone and Nancy, Tessa and Mom get in the car to go home. They are tired, and I think Tessa and Mom are tired of pretending to be happy. But I can't go yet. The men are all still here. Even Rosario and Sarafin who don't speak much English and aren't being hired by Bill. Mario has decided to work for another rice farmer who asked for his permanent employment. The men aren't going to be without jobs. They are some of the most skilled farm workers in the area. At least that's what the people in charge of their termination tell me. Both Dad and Grandpa invested the time to train them, they have knowledge of farming some farmers don't even have, "So don't worry," they tell me, "They'll be okay."

Suddenly, I look around me and notice that only my cousin Mike, Joe, the men and I are left. Mike boasts about coolers still filled with beer. "Who wants another?" he pressures. "I do," I announce decidedly, not ready to leave and have this day be final.

All the eyes look at me with surprise and amusement. Mike grabs a few more beers and we begin drinking. A quarter is placed on the table. It's flipped, Mario guesses "heads." He's wrong. Mike spins the quarter while Mario chugs his beer and we all have the challenge of keeping the quarter going so Mario will have to continue. I get a good flick in, which makes Mario keep going until his beer is done. Jeers are made because I got him. And after Mario finishes, he gets to choose who guesses next. "Corrie," he says. "Heads or tails?" He flips the quarter, keeping the secret between his palms until I choose. "Tails." He opens his palms. It's heads. He got me, and now I drink while the men laugh and try desperately to keep the quarter spinning.

Mario drove truck while I drove bank-out the summer I helped with rice harvest. Once, when I came to dump the load of rice I received from the harvester, I pulled up too close to the double trailers used to haul the rice to the dryer. I swung the huge back tires of the bank-out in toward the trailers in order to get the spout over the last empty space. After the first trailer was full, I tried to back up, but my tires were turned too far in and I was running into the trailers. Starting to panic just a little, and knowing Mario was watching me from the cab of the truck, I shifted forward and backward trying to clear my back tires from the path of the trailers. After many minutes, I was still stuck. I opened the cab to the bank-out, climbed down and yelled to Mario who had watched the whole thing, but never tried to take over until I asked him. He hopped down out of the truck, climbed the ladder into the cab of the bank-out and with incredible ease pulled away from the trailers and backed up to the empty trailer so I could get rid of the rice in my bin and hurry to get the next load from the harvester dangerously close to capacity. I let out an exasperated, "Thank you." Mario, after he had rescued me, just smiled. Never laughing

at me or teasing me about it again. The only thing he ever said to me about harvest that year was “Good job, you drive bank-out better than some of the guys out here.” And now we are drinking cold beer on a freezing day sitting in the shop on the last day that he will work for my family.

The afternoon rolls on and more beer is consumed. Ramon, Rosario, Sarafin, Frankie, A.J., Benji, Mario and Mike and I are the only ones left. We continue to drink beer to the beat of the spinning quarter and as my body warms with the heat of the alcohol, I become brave and use what little Spanish I’ve learned in school to strike up a conversation with Rosario. Rosario worked for Grandpa Harry when he bought the ranch in 1951. He is 45 years my senior, has quietly watched me grow up while at the same time watching my dad grow into the successful farmer he was when he died. Through the broken words of our respective languages I learn he has a daughter my age, in college. I learn about his father’s own trek to the United States to work and I hear of the family he left in Mexico. We talk of my dad, receiving translations from A.J. or Mario who speak both languages perfectly. He tells me how my dad’s leadership differed Grandpa Harry’s. “Harry would assign a job,” A.J. translates, “and then stick around and watch you do it. But John, John would tell you what to do and then leave...sometimes it would be weeks before we saw him again.” All the men laugh knowingly as Rosario smiles at me, suddenly very wise and grandfather-like. His smile is plagued with sadness, with the knowledge of an end. I don’t ask what he’s going to do now that he can’t work here anymore, but we are both aware of that fact hovering in the cold air between us. The beer is gone and it is late. I am tired. We rise from the table, I gather my keys, and help D.B., who had been quietly sleeping next to one of the space heaters,

into the back of the car. We don't make a big deal of goodbye. I turn back, casually wave my thanks and linger just long enough to see Rosario slide quietly out the back door of the shop. Letting the door shut slowly behind him, he walks out into the dark rain.

Everlasting life is something I will never have.
I move so gradually.
So slowly that people hardly notice.
Except for those who have shared my banks
For over 50 years.
There are still those
Who can remember my changes.
My migrations.
My journey.
I will not always be here.
I will dry up.
If I dry up before my time,
I really am simply changing my course.
I am on a different course now.
I am a different form now.
I can not, do not, just cease to exist.