

My friends and family thought I needed counseling.

Some of them suggested I go to one of those group therapy things. They said, *There are many people going through what you are. They come together, grieve, talk to one another, and move on.*

Obviously, if I thought I belonged there or needed to go, I would have.

They told me I was in denial. My best friend Rachel said, *I'm here for you. I'm just two hours away.* She said, *Call me anytime. Maybe you just need to talk a few things through. Clear your head, you know?*

They suggested other things too. *You should have Drew take you to the spa. You should take a hike up a mountain. Yoga? Vacation. Write a story about it. Hypnotism is supposed to work.*

They looked at me with their heads tilted like you do when scanning a row of titles in a bookstore. They looked angry. No, they looked more annoyed. *Two years is a long time. You need to start living your life.*

I was not really angry either. Everyone has lost someone close. Or they know someone who has lost someone, at the very least. But they didn't get it. My mother was coming back.

I understand that this doesn't happen all that often.

I received books in the post from my Aunt Helen. *Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul. Grieving God's Way. The Loss of Someone You Love.* I read that woman, Kubler-Ross. Well, I read it in my sociology class on death and dying. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally the acceptance phase. The opinion of my family was that I was stuck in denial, when in fact, my personal belief was that this was just one big misunderstanding and it would eventually straighten out and blow over. And if anything, I thought I was in phase two because I have a serious bone to pick with whoever was responsible for this mistake. And to go even further, I was a little phase three as well, because I was willing to bargain all kinds to find out who it was. But it is hard to be depressed when you know with utter certainty the person who everyone else thought was dead, is coming back. Therefore, there was nothing to accept.

I'm not one of those mystical people. Or people who "believe." But I went to a psychic anyways. I thought if there were anyone who

would have seen it my way, it would have been this person. She could have found out what happened to my mother. Or told me the name of the person who took her. Or even better, she would have given me her current phone number and address. But all she told me was, *She is in a better place*. Like the Florida Keys? Or Ireland? I then pressed for where this better place was. She replied, *The other side*. Well, that wasn't very exact. On the other side of the river? Is she in Cambridge? Or Seattle on the other side of the country? For forty bucks a pop, she could have at least given me a coastline.

My boyfriend Drew thought that I was having some issues. Well, at least, that is what I heard him explaining to people on the phone. He didn't really believe me either, but he said, *Babe, if you believe it, then I believe it*. He is one of those really on-board kinds of boyfriends. Before we go to bed sometimes, he asks me why I never cry. Why should I cry? I'm as happy as a clam. Then he just rolls over and goes to sleep.

I made Drew go out and buy one of those Ouija Boards. He wasn't happy he had to spend money on the thing and play with me too. It wasn't much help. I never got any real words. I'd say, *Tell me where my mother is*. One time, I got WELLC. Well cared for? Welch's Grape Juice? Henry Wells? An old writer, but never wrote anything about this. There are lots of places that start with WELL. Wells, Mississippi. Wellington, Colorado. Wellington, Florida. But being from Boston, all of those places are a far drive, and I don't know where she is. And with gas being so expensive and all...

Eventually I just stopped. Stopped talking about it. I put on a sad face, so the family would believe I started the depression phase and was clear on my way to acceptance. Which in itself seemed ridiculous. My Aunt Helen dragged me to one of those group meetings. Everyone was sobbing, talking about his or her feelings and different ways to move on. I had to keep up appearances, so I thought about the time my dog died when I was eleven. But, I mean, I couldn't say for certain that all of those people's sisters and kids and dads were dead, and I know that sometimes people really do die. I wanted to ask them, *Have you really looked into it? Are you sure they are gone for good?* In my particular case, my mom is young, so obviously it is a mistake. I didn't want to tell them that my mother was alive because I didn't want to offend anyone, and after all, it was a grief support group.

I tried to keep up her house as best I could, but it was kind of hard when her house was in North Carolina and I was in Boston. But I had someone who cut the grass and watered the perennials I planted. Mother really loved the outside and I would not want her to think I didn't take

care of it while she was gone. I did cancel her cable and Internet. That stuff was expensive and I didn't have a definite date as to when she would be back. I took Rufus the dog, because he is needy. I borrowed a few other things like the big TV, and I needed a toaster oven. I also took her jewelry, shoes (she always had nice shoes), and a few pictures from the mantle.

This went on for about two years. Driving to North Carolina all the time. It was okay because I got a life insurance check from my mother's disappearance and I haven't had to work since. People would ask, *Why don't you just sell the house?* Well, she isn't going to live with me and Drew when she gets back, that is for sure.

And as it turned out, I was right. Mom did come back.

One Sunday morning, I was watering the plants in the front of her yard. It was sunny and warm. Drew was packing up a load of things we were taking back to the apartment. We took a few lamps and an area rug.

*Don't let that hose drag across the grass. It will leave a mark,* she said from the driveway.

*I knew it!* I said. *I knew you were coming back.*

She said she got stuck 130 miles west of Wellington, Colorado. The Ouija board was right. There were some weather issues and a mix-up with her flight. Then there was something wrong with the runway. It had to be de-iced. I said, *For two years?* She said, *Tell me about it.*

Drew knew my mom from before. We visited on holidays. But now, he was staring at her like he was seeing a ghost. *Nice to see you again Drew,* my mother said to him. He didn't say anything. He just squeezed the bridge of his nose with his fingers and walked away.

*He is a little constipated today,* I said.

I told her how I had to stop telling people she was coming back. I told her how her own sister, my Aunt Helen, didn't believe me. I told her everyone thought she was really dead. Well, that was just a huge assumption on everyone's part. *Where is Rufus?* she said.

*He is in the yard,* I said.

Mom yelled for the dog, and sure enough Rufus came running. *Poor baby, I missed you so much. Did Rufus miss mommy? Oh yes he did. Oh yes he did! You are looking a little scrawny. Did your big sister not feed you good?*

I fed him just fine, I thought to myself. I even bought him a furry bed to sleep on, and those Protect-a-Paw booties so he could walk the streets of Boston in the winter. I realized she didn't hug or kiss me yet. There was no warm embrace like I pictured so many times. She didn't even ask what I had been doing for the last two years of my life.

And okay, I was a little jealous of the dog.

*You gained a little weight honey*, she said. That bitch.

*Yea, I don't know...somehow I haven't had much time to go to the gym.*

Then the next-door neighbors saw over the fence that Mom was back and they came running over. They just didn't know what to say, but invited us over for dinner really soon. Drew came back out from the house.

*So, you are really her mom? So, people just come back from the dead now whenever they choose? I've seen your death certificate. I've been to your grave*, Drew said. I elbowed him. He can be a little over-the-top sometimes.

She didn't answer. She just asked if we were staying for dinner.

We all piled into my car (after Drew unpacked everything he loaded in before) and went to the grocery store.

*Oh wow. That is a new building! When did Murphy's Bar close down? This town seems like a real drag now, not many men, huh?*

Mom rolled down her window and screamed out to a UPS man wheeling packages into the florists. *Hey baby. I'm back!*

He just waved nervously and kept going.

*Mom, don't shout out the window! People will think we are crazy.*

*Well, I have to find a date for tonight. I'm not going to be hanging out with you two duds.*

Drew shuffled in the backseat. I looked through the rear-view mirror and he was looking at me too.

At the grocery store, we filled the cart with all sorts of things. She needed to buy everything new because I didn't leave a single thing in the house. I didn't want bugs and mice. She hadn't been around for the "natural food" boom, so that was new to her. She kept asking why everything was so expensive, even though it all looked the same. She grabbed a few organic apples anyways.

When the checkout clerk finally rang everything up, mom just stood there.

*Mom, are you going to pay?* I asked.

*Oh dear. I don't have any money. Mind paying, since you threw all my good food out?*

I looked at Drew. He swiped his credit card through the machine and didn't say a word. He sure was grumpy. Maybe he was hungry.

We pulled into the driveway and saw a herd of people standing there waiting. It was the neighbors, my Aunt Helen and her three kids, the local priest, and a lot of middle-aged men. They pointed and hugged and cried. The priest was on his knees, muttering something.

Aunt Helen screamed at the sight of Mom and fell to her knees. She started chanting some prayer, but quickly ran off to call News Channel 8 and Channel 4. Mom started yelling at the news anchors because their trucks were rolling over her front yard. One of them hit Mom's antique rose bush with that long antenna thing that comes off the top. She was angry, but invited them all in for dinner. It was a good thing she bought all of that food because she made everyone stay for dinner. I had to clean up the dishes after.

We held a press conference in the parlor we only use for special occasions. She explained the whole thing about the airport in Colorado and not one of them asked any serious questions. They were like, *Oh yeah. Of course. Weather issues. Sure.* She told them if there were any questions at all, to call the doctors and the minister and the funeral home. They all checked out the verifiable information. But no one questioned that my mother was back. Because, obviously she was.

*Can we go home now?* Drew asked.

*Well, don't you think we should stay? It is her first night back.*

*I don't think she really wants us here.* He tried to say it nice, but I was getting that feeling too.

So we packed our things. I still took one of the lamps, because the one in our living room had broken. Outside we said our good-byes.

*Rufus, come on, time to go.* I swung open the car door. And he leaped in.

*You aren't taking the dog!* Mom yelled.

*Oh! Just a habit, I guess. Well, do you want me to take him anyways until you settle in?*

*No.* She opened the door and Rufus jumped out.

I wanted that damn dog. He was mine for the last two years. I think I had him longer than she ever did. I bought him stuff and got him the good kind of food, not the generic stuff.

We drove home and I was happy to be out of there.

I couldn't help but think our reunion was going to be somewhat different. I could ask her all the things I never got a chance to, like where did she keep the light bulbs for the house, or how to knit a scarf, or when was the proper time to send out Christmas cards. I would ask her why she never told me about her boyfriend, who I ended up meeting at the memorial. I would tell her all the things I never had a chance to, not just the whole I love you thing. Like that in ninth grade it was me who hit the cat with the car. Or that I don't blame her for everything anymore. And then we would go outlet shopping. And have coffee. And the world would spin again.

But that isn't how it happened, and over the next few weeks, things got worse. I was lonely without Rufus hanging around my feet. She would call me up and ask for money, citing that it was too difficult for her to find a job. And she would whine when I told her no. She would call and demand her princess cut diamond studs back. I would have given them back to her if they hadn't been stolen last year when someone broke into my apartment. She didn't like that explanation. She then asked about her Manolo Blahnik black pumps with the straps. I denied everything. I loved those shoes more than life.

One time, she threatened to die again, so I hung up the phone.

She wasn't the same mom from two years ago. I was afraid I was never going to see or talk to that mom again. We used to hug and talk about boys from the neighborhood. Make ice cream sundaes and watch *Survivor*. Granted I hadn't been around all that much before she went away. And Mom didn't like the fact that I moved to Boston. But at least then we were okay.

The life insurance company wanted their money back. I told them to go call my mother. Besides, I spent it all. How was I to know she was going to come back?

After that, Drew decided for my own mental well-being we should change the phone number. Maybe move.

And get a dog.