

“Dear Beth”

Satisfied, I smiled as the wet rag wiped the soap scum from the bottom of the bathtub. *Waiting five minutes really does work*, I thought as I glanced at the instructions on the Vim bottle. I needed to stop being so impatient; it would at least save me the arm pain from scrubbing aggressively at an unproductive right angle.

I heard the clang of beer bottles and a door closing as my partner begrudgingly removed the stubborn reminders of last months’ party. One by one, Phil was completing the household chores I’d asked him to do. I was just happy to finally to get his hands away from the keyboard and into the kitchen sink. It had been a great weekend visiting friends in Hamilton, but that all ended when we walked back into our apartment to meet the smell of unwashed dishes and an unemptied garbage can – things I’d asked him to do before we left. Unable to hide my rising anger for long, I’d started a passive-aggressive fighting match. Aware of my combat strategy and unable to deal with it, Phil had soon risen silently from his computer to do his part. Predictably, my anger had given way to a feeling of guilt for making him do something he clearly didn’t want to. On a Sunday evening. After a two-hour bus ride home.

I gave the tub a few more swipes. *He should know better than to leave dishes for a weekend, though*, I thought. *And I always spend Sunday evenings cleaning. Why do I always have to ask him to help? And why does it make me feel bad?*

But I knew I didn’t really regret making Phil do something he didn’t want to. I wanted to get him away from his writing. I just didn’t understand how he could spend so much time working on a novel manuscript and neglecting his school work – while still somehow managing to receive the highest marks in our English doctoral program. I

struggled each week to fit in all of my readings, come prepared to every class, go through my assignments with a fine-tooth comb, and get a head-start researching my final papers. I did it for my own sake, not for the marks (at least that's what I'd been telling myself since my New Year's Resolution). But each time I heard him typing away on his keyboard while I was decoding Derrida or trying to make sense of *Swann's Way*, I could feel Shakespeare's green-eyed monster sneaking up on me. When I did have free time, all I wanted to do was crash. But even then, there were floors to sweep, clothes to clean, and surely something to organise. Where did he find the time? How did he *make* the time?

I also knew that time was just an excuse. I didn't want to admit it, but my writing had suffered. I had spent four years of an undergrad, one year of a Master's, and half a year of a doctoral program honing critical thinking skills and crafting scholarly papers. After years of hard work, I still hadn't developed a strong academic voice – and in the meantime, I'd lost my creative one.

Recently, I'd tried to get it back. I was alone in the apartment after my Canadian Literature class last Wednesday since Phil had his tutorial class. So I came home, opened a Word document, and started writing. It was Sinclair Ross, believe it or not, who'd inspired me. Canadian Literature was as far from my area of interest as you could possible get, but Ross somehow stirred something up in me. Unreliable narrator or not, Mrs. Bentley's character had reminded me of how I wanted my characters to be – complex, contradictory. But I could only focus on one topic: my inability to write. After an hour, I'd filled half a page – and by then, it was time to make supper.

I sighed. The tub was gleaming.

The familiar tune of the cordless phone rang out in the apartment. I opened the old wooden door and tucked the cleaning supplies back into the bathroom cupboard. I heard the back door squeak open as Phil came in from the cold. Remembering that I still had to clean the toilet, I went to the phone, picked up the receiver and pressed “talk.”

“Hello?”

“Stephanie, did you get my email?” It was my mom’s familiar tone, but I was still getting used to her new direct mode of address. Self-conscious about the fact that her three daughters were not really interested in chatting with their mother every day, she now managed to make the long-distance calls only when there was a pressing issue at hand.

“No, I haven’t checked it today,” I answered, my voice unable to prevent the irritated tone it took on whenever she phoned. I wished I were a better daughter.

“Well, you should check. Dad sent you an email,” she said. “It’s about your aunt.”

I immediately perked up. “What is it? What about Beth?”

“Well.” She paused, aware of the tension in my voice, but unsure as to whether the cause was the news or the messenger. “You’d better read Dad’s email.”

My mind blanked for a moment, then flashed back to my mom’s call last weekend. She and Dad had phoned to tell me that my aunt Beth’s fight with cancer wasn’t going so well. She’d had cancer for a few years now, and in so many parts of her body – her back, her bowels, her vagina, her lymph nodes – but she’d always seemed to bounce back in a typical Beth way.

“I’ll read his email later. What is it?” I asked impatiently, abandoning any earlier attempts to remedy my bad habit.

“Ok, ok,” she said quickly, always eager to please or appease, depending on the situation. “Beth’s not doing so well. They think that she’s not going to make it through these next few days.”

Shows how much your prayers helped, I thought, but resisted blurting out in order to avoid hurting her feelings. My mother had been characteristically optimistic about Beth’s health last weekend, electing prayer as a viable option to help recover a sick body that was no longer receiving chemo. My dad, on the other hand, had not been so confident in the Lord’s power. His frustrated interruptions had served as a realistic counterpoint to her musings, but she’d kept the faith. I almost admired her for it.

“So, what does that mean?”

“Well, Dad gives more information in the email,” she replied. “He’s on his way to Deer Lake right now to try and catch the first flight out to St. John. He’s going to rent a car there and head down to Bar Harbour. The flight might be delayed though – there’s a storm coming.” A note of panic rose in my mother’s voice. Isolation and winter storms were only two of the many factors that prevented her from becoming as attached to the island as my father was. Yet even he was probably questioning his devotion as he made the treacherous evening trek along the silent highway bridging Deer Lake and Stephenville. But as the only boy of six Oliver girls, and the one closest to my aunt Beth, my dad had more important things to worry about.

“He’ll be fine,” I said, already having too much to worry about. “I’ll check the email later. What’s the news now?”

My mother calmly described Beth's current condition. Cancer had spread to her lungs and her liver. Beth had decided that her break from chemotherapy, which had only been temporary to run a series of tests, should be made permanent. The tests and treatments, the prodding and pain – it had all become too much for her. She'd grown too weak to eat, so the doctors had been feeding her intravenously. Although the increased doses of morphine kept her in a fog most of the time, in her lucid moments, she'd been making clear decisions. Her most recent choice was to stop receiving nutrients.

“So, it will only be a few more days ...” My mom's voice trailed off.

I pressed the phone to my ear but covered the mouthpiece so she wouldn't hear the tears rolling down my face. I was too distraught to realize that you couldn't hear tears.

Grabbing a tissue from the box by the phone to wipe my wet face, I took a deep, silent breath.

“So, what can I do?” I asked, intent on doing *something*.

“You could send her a card,” my mom suggested. “Not ‘get well soon’ or anything like that, but something nice.”

“But will it get there in time?”

She hesitated.

“Marty and Daniel will appreciate it,” she said, referring to Beth's husband and son.

“I know, but I want to say something to Beth,” I stressed. A half-formed thought flashed through my hazy head. “I really want to write her a letter.”

“Well, how about you send it to dad?” my mom suggested. “He’ll be checking his email when he gets there. Maybe he can read it to her.”

I wiped my nose with the tissue and nodded at the phone. “Ok, I’m going to do that right now.”

“That would be really nice,” my mom said reassuringly. “Call me if you need anything. And don’t forget to check dad’s email. If anything happens, he’ll be sending you travel plans right away.”

“Alright. I love you,” I said, with Beth on my mind.

“Love you too, honey.”

“Bye.”

I hung up the phone. Giving my face a few more swipes, I balled up the sopping tissue, walked into the kitchen and tossed it into the wastebasket. My ears re-adjusted to the sounds of the apartment, and I heard the familiar clicking of busy hands on a keyboard. I reached for another tissue as a few more tears washed down my cheeks.

I walked slowly into the office. Typing away, Phil kept his face glued to the screen. Feeling the tension in the air, I remembered that we’d had a fight earlier. I wasn’t concerned with that now. Yet I kept silent as I collected my laptop from the other side of the room, careful not to sniff so I wouldn’t reveal my distress. I really needed this time for Beth. For myself.

February 10, 2008

Dear Beth,

I know you have so many supportive people around you right now who love and care for you deeply (and many more banging down the doors to get there!), but I just wanted to send you my love and support from afar.

I feel a different connection with each Oliver aunt based on her own unique qualities. I always felt a particular affinity with you, Beth, when it came to my writing. I have always admired your devotion to teaching English, and the national recognition you received for your work. I love that you constantly ask about my writing interests and discuss your own students. I remember wanting to go to Maine so badly so I could sit in on the creative writing workshops at your school. I still have the teen magazine you sent me featuring a photo shoot with a few of your male students (that might have been part of the draw!). I was so excited to finally go to Maine in grade 11 for the Lion's Club Speak-Out in Waterville. I will never forget our tours of Bates, Bowdoin, and Colby College with you – how you sang my praises to the recruiting officer, and how we checked out the buildings ourselves, speaking to students, checking out the cafeterias and residences, and moonlighting around campus as if we belonged there!

Your enthusiasm for English and interest in my own education still influences me today. When you and Marty popped in to visit Adrienne and I in our Antigonish basement apartment during the summer of 2006, I was getting ready to go to The University of Western Ontario for my Master's. I remember telling you about how nervous I was about marking undergraduate papers as a Teaching Assistant, and told you that I didn't feel prepared. You showed me the Mount Desert Island High School website and introduced me to all the English resources you had listed there – including your own marking rubric. I'd never even heard of a rubric before! But I still have the site bookmarked on my computer and use it whenever need be. And I know you asked me at the time what I was thinking of studying – I still haven't figured it out for sure, but I think my dissertation will be on how cyberspace affects conceptions of subjectivity (spatially, phenomenologically, etc). It's not exactly Sheakespeare or Shelley, but it really interests me and has had a huge affect on my generation, and – whether professors in my department want to admit it or not – on our conception of "English" as well. It's included under a relatively new category known as "post-humanism" (you may have heard of it, but I just wanted to keep you updated!).

Of course, you weren't only enthusiastic and encouraging when it came to writing; you were always thinking of ways to get us involved in something creative! Whenever you delegated the cousins to prepare for an upcoming party at the cottage, you made sure to take our talents into account. I must have made more banners, signs, posters, drawings, cards, and poems at the cottage than anywhere else. When I think about it, I learned more about creativity, collaboration, and meeting (last minute) deadlines under your supervision than I could have in any English program, journalism job, or writer's conference! Not only did you encourage us to develop our talents, but you made sure we all felt like we had an important role in something big – which was always the case with Oliver parties at Port Hood! I'll always remember the last big party I attended there – Rob and Gillian's wedding party – when you put me in charge of making the "wildflower bouquet." I didn't have a clue what I was doing, but you knew exactly where to get the

best flowers and we drove all over Port Hood collecting them. After a long drive down a dusty dead-end road, I hesitantly got my feet wet as you strode past the dried seaweed and straight into the water to get some weed-like clusters growing among the rocks. At the top of the hill above the cottage, you handed me gloves and showed me how to avoid getting cut by thorns so I could snap up some wild white roses from the side of the road. I may not have caught the bouquet when Gill finally threw it, but I didn't miss out on anything – I'd already captured the best moments of the day.

The memories I have of you at Port Hood will be harder to get out of my head than sand in the cottage futon! Every summer, you seem to have a new hat, necklace, or earrings, but you have the same bright smile, soft voice, and big laugh – all are undeniably Oliver, but uniquely Beth. Your free spirit is infectious, and for me, signifies summer. When I was younger, I loved when Mom and Dad let Adrienne and I drive with you, Marty and Daniel from Point Tupper. We'd look for the "stone house" at the halfway point and relatives' houses as we passed through Judique. Then we'd head into Port Hood, with Sammy howling in the back and "Five Guys Named Moe" blasting from the speakers. I loved being a part of your family's fun-loving, laidback lifestyle.

I may have grown up on the coast of Newfoundland, but my own personal relationship with the sea developed with your help on Port Hood beach. You taught me to find beauty in a piece of glass – the rounded blues, greens, and whites – left behind by the sea. I loved collecting sea glass and sand dollars to proudly deposit in your jar back at the cottage. I always took a sand dollar back home with me as a little piece of my amazing summer memories; but it would inevitably split and splinter into dust. I knew, though, that your jar would be there when I came back the next year. You are an integral part of my everlasting childhood memories of Port Hood beach: the hot days in the waves (trying to avoid jellyfish!), the bonfires and s'mores on the beach past our bedtime, the Monopoly games you let us set up in your room; the heaps of food spread out along the table and bar, the parties and conversations lasting late into the night. Whenever I hear "Out on the Myra," see sea-glass blue glassware, or spot signature "Beth" jewelry, I think of you.

I know it's usually my Dad who takes you on these trips down memory lane, but I really wanted to this time around – just to let you know that you've not only been in my thoughts recently, but you always have been in them and you always will be. It was great to see you at Catherine's wedding just last summer – you looked fabulous, and had the same bright smile, soft voice, big laugh, infectious spirit and Oliver enthusiasm. For me, you are summer personified, and you will continue to inspire me!

*Love,
Stephanie*

Raising my fingers from the keyboard, I arched my back to stretch my seizing muscles. Holed up in the bedroom, I'd been leaning over my laptop – typing, reading,

remembering, re-reading – for the last three hours. I knew my letter was unabashedly sentimental. It was exactly the type of thing we’d spend a whole class critiquing for one of my courses. I knew that, and I didn’t care.

Sentimental or not, I couldn’t cry anymore; I’d accumulated a bed-full of crumpled tissues and a severe ache behind my eyes. I couldn’t keep them open for much longer. In fact, my entire mind was on the verge of shutting down. It wasn’t used to pouring through so many memories. Recalling critical theories and literary themes, maybe; but it usually focused on the here and now. I was exhausted.

I had to send it to my dad before I went to bed. Opening my email account, I saw the message from him and opened it first. It reiterated most of the information that my mother had told me, but was filtered through the father’s distinct, lyrical lens. I paused on one paragraph, and realized I did still have tears to cry.

I wish that I could have better news to deliver, but there comes a time when we must let a lazy tear roll down our cheek and try to accept the reality of life and death ... if not next week, or next month ... certainly within not too many sunsets. ... It is probably the busiest time of the year in my annual calendar of events with the Provincial Masters races on this weekend and the NL Marathon and Festival of Skiers just two weeks away, but as they say in Newfoundland, "what odds" There are some sweet moments to spend with a dear sister that I will cherish ... the ski events that we are hosting will come and go and will quickly evaporate from memory. Over the next week, I am sure that Beth and I will cover an expanse of verbal territory that we have not had a chance to touch during our 55 plus years on this earth and that will be wonderful. Oh so sad, Dad.

I noted his increasing ignorance of grammatical accuracy – an indisputably unimportant thing in relation to my aunt Beth’s condition, but a significant signal of my father’s emotional state. Whether it was a “View From the Whaleback” column for *The Western Star* or a hiking article for an outdoor magazine, my dad never sent an email without spending significant time editing it first. This was especially true for emails of

great import. It suddenly hit me that all of his well-crafted, multi-drafted emails of “great import” were actually not the important ones at all.

I hit “reply” and attached my letter. I typed a few words of solace to my dad, and assured him that I wanted to come to the funeral whenever it would be. Clicking “send,” I set my laptop on the pillow beside me, pushed the tissues onto the floor, and made myself comfortable. Too lazy to turn the lights off or call Phil to come in, I fell asleep in satisfying silence. Only my computer purred softly next to me.

“Wake up, Steph-sie.”

I felt a nudge on the shoulder.

“Huh?” I murmured.

“It’s 8:45. You have class at 9:30.”

“What?” I groaned, opening my eyes to look at my affirming alarm clock. “Oh.”

Stretching, I realized I was still wearing my sweatshirt and jogging pants from the night before. *Weird*, I thought, slowly swinging my feet over the bed and resting them on a pile of tissues. I saw my laptop, shut off and sitting in the corner of the room. *Oh*, I thought. *Beth*.

I got up, arbitrarily picked some clothes from my closet, and ran some fingers through my hair. I turned back to the bed, and saw that Phil had fallen back asleep. Heading to the dresser, I looked into the mirror at the puffy red eyes staring back at me. I started sifting through my makeup bag for some kind of solution. *Blush. Lipstick. Where’s my cover-up ...*

“Are you ok?” a quiet voice asked.

I twisted around to see Phil with both eyes opened.

“Not really,” I replied.

“Is your aunt Beth ok? I heard you mention her name on the phone last night.”

I was quiet for a moment. “No. She’s probably going to die in the next few days. I guess you knew she stopped chemo last week – but now it’s permanent. She’s decided to – to stop being fed intravenously,” I choked.

Phil quietly apologized.

I sat on the edge of the bed. “I wrote her a letter last night. To tell her what she meant to me. I want to make sure it gets to her in time. I sent it to my dad, he’s on his way there now. He might be there already, if his flight left on time last night.”

Phil sat up in bed and began rubbing my back. I smiled slightly at him.

“It’s just happening so fast, you know? It doesn’t seem real. And this has never happened to me before. I’ve never had someone die in my family. My grandmother when I was eight, and my grandfather a few years later, but they were both in their eighties and passed on peacefully. With Beth, it’s just so shocking.”

I looked down at my hands and the bitten fingernails. “I don’t even know what to do. Do I go to class? How does this work? This waiting, it’s horrible.”

“Well, how do you feel?” asked Phil.

“I was pretty upset last night,” I said. “But writing the letter definitely helped. I actually feel alright now that I sent it off. I just hope my dad gets to read it to her before ...” I broke off. “Anything happens.” I looked at Phil for answers.

“I guess everyone deals with it differently,” he said, his voice warm with comfort as his hand rested on my arm. “If you feel like staying home, you should stay. If you’re up for going to class, then you should go.”

I thought about it for a minute. “I guess I’ll go. I don’t really know what to do with myself if I stay. I feel like I’ve said what I wanted. I don’t know what else there is to do.”

“Maybe there is nothing else,” he shrugged.

“Maybe,” I echoed, eyeing the clock over his shoulder. I gave a hollow smile as I rose from the bed, hurried to the dresser, and reached for the cover-up.

I pushed through the heavy doors and into the bustling library. During class, my professor had brought up our first major assignment, due next week – I’d completely forgotten. My professor was kind and I was certain she would be understanding, but I had been unsure about whether I should bring up my aunt’s sickness or not. I didn’t even know how to broach such a precarious topic. *I’m waiting for my aunt to die ... don’t worry, it will probably happen soon, so an extra week should be long enough.* It just didn’t sound right. I had remained silent on the subject and headed straight for the library after class, figuring I could get some preliminary research out of the way before I left for the funeral – whenever that would be.

I walked towards the computer terminals, where a sea of young students clicked away on their keyboards. The sound was amplified by the vast chamber of the main library hall. Eager to escape the irritating echoes, I descended on the first unoccupied computer and logged onto my student account. *What were some of the major Media*

Studies Journals that Professor Quan-Haase mentioned in class? Was IT & Society one?

I opened the library website and entered the title in the journal database.

As the system slowly churned to process the findings, my mind immediately shifted to Beth. *Maybe there's news*, I thought, logging onto my email account in a new window. I didn't know what to expect as my eyes were bombarded with a host of new messages. Scanning the subject lines, I registered the words "ticket," "arrangements," "family," and finally, my eyes slowing down, the phrase "Beth has passed on."

Mechanically, I opened the message.

Hi gals ... normally I would say that this is sad news but actually it is also was a joyous event to see Beth pass on ... she was on her last breaths for most of the day. Will talk more ... call Mom ... she passed on at about 6:25 this morning ... I was so pleased that I was with her ... I had a chance to read your letter to her Stephanie and I also read a Michael Donahue poem ... after she passed. Beth was ready ... she was resting peacefully and Marty was just preparing to snooze beside her on a cot and we were in the family room and she said I've had enough and passed on. Bye for now, Love Dad

The grammatical absurdity of my dad's message and its desperate need of spell-check was, again, so out of character, I almost laughed. I flushed at the thought of my letter being read alongside her favourite poet. But had Beth actually heard my letter, or had dad read it after she passed? I re-read the message, appreciating its ambiguity. I wasn't going to ask. It was enough for me.

I smiled, satisfied.