

12

GOOD GRIEF

Z Nicolazzo

Hey, Mom ~~

A new fall term is quickly approaching, which means that it's almost been two years since you passed away. I still see you every single day—there are pictures of you all over the house, so you are never far—and yet, with each day, I miss you with an increased intensity. It's true what Eva told me right after you passed away: the grief never leaves. It wanes and waxes, but it is consistently present, unmetabolizable and insoluble. The grief remains with me, day after day after day.

I remember talking with you about my work, and I know you were so proud of me—your child, the faculty member and author. I know you worried about me, too. You were, after all, a deeply loving mother to the very end, with much of your love showing up in worrying if I was eating enough (I still am), making friends (I just know you'd love the folks you never got to meet), getting enough sleep (this one is a toss-up), and if people were treating me well (it's a hard time to be a trans person, let alone a trans woman, but I'm doing okay). I know your worry was a signal of the depth of your love for me, your pride in who I was becoming, and your desire to always protect me, and for that I am eternally grateful.

About four months before you passed, and two weeks before I called you to tell you I was promoted with tenure, I went on a long walk on the Rillito River Path. The path had just gotten some fresh signs painted on the ground. They were all one word, spray painted in all caps: SLOW (Figure 12.1). I guess the increased foot and bike traffic from people needing to burn off nervous energy during the early days of the COVID pandemic necessitated some added safety



FIGURE 12.1 “SLOW” sign painted on river path. Photograph by the author.

reminders. I had seen these spray-painted signs on previous walks, but they seemed to take on a new significance for me on this one long walk. My mind drifted back to the last five years, and then forward to the anxiety of the impending two weeks before I found out if I was to achieve tenure and promotion. The more I kept seeing these SLOW signs along the river path and thinking about my time as an early career scholar, the more I kept wondering: why had I been in such a rush? These walking meditations—and the SLOW signs I keep walking past in the sticky heat of late monsoon season weather—took on a different sense of urgency after you passed, especially as you had taught me so much about the beauty of a slow, prudent, and careful life lived.

When I was a kid, I was always in a rush. I walked fast, I ran fast, I ate fast, and I did my schoolwork fast. I could get away with that last part because I was a decently smart and highly curious child, but as I entered my first faculty position, I realized that pace had not left my being. However, what *did* change was *why* I kept moving at the clip I did. When I was a kid, I zipped around because I was always trying to catch up. I was the youngest and shortest in the family, so my steps were literally shorter. This was the same on the soccer field, too; having shorter parents meant I needed to be a bit quicker to beat other (often taller) kids to the ball.

But when I became an adult, and as I moved into my transness, I came to understand my fast pace as a signal of my own worry...and not the kind that is drenched in love, as yours was. Instead, my worry was existential—if I did not do more, and do more quickly, then maybe my colleagues would recognize I was a joke, that I was not meant to be where I was, doing what I was doing. I feared this all because girls like me are not meant to get tenure-track positions, and people who are defiantly queer, and who take

decidedly critical orientations to the institutions through which they work, are not always well-appreciated...unless they produce. And even then, they—me, we, us girls—are still made out to be semi-pariahs who are kept at arm's length from daily operations.

I would not call what I was feeling imposter syndrome. Instead, I would call it the daily reality of transmisogyny. And with every meeting I was shut out of, with every new back spasm I got from sitting at my desk chair far longer than I should (and slumped over—I still have that bad habit), with every reminder from my department chair at my first job that collegiality was an important component of the tenure and promotion process, my worry grew. Would I be both the first openly trans girl to get a tenure-track position in my discipline, and also the first trans girl to not get tenure in my discipline?

To be honest, that worry was compounded by a deep sense of unhappiness—a feeling I tried so hard to keep from you, but think you probably knew. Despite the amazing friends I had, no matter how outwardly successful it seemed I was, and regardless of the number of publications I had accepted, I just...was not happy. I had ingested so many dreadful sentiments about trans people that it was hard to feel good about myself, which was further compounded by a deep loneliness I felt living in rural Illinois. I had a couple friends who were close by, of course, but setting up a life in that space was just really challenging. I know I should have told you more about this and know you would have been there for me through it all...but I worried about you worrying. My goodness, what a pair we were with all our worry!

Not only did I feel like I should not talk to you about all these things swirling for me, but I felt like I could not be public about it either. All the queer and trans students and new professionals needed something from me, and it wasn't the sort of vulnerability where I talked about my growing CV through a lens of writing through anxiety, fear, worry, and unhappiness. They needed me to be a model, someone they could take pride in, and someone who was creating evidence for the things they were experiencing in the world. Even now I am worried about what it means to be this open, but I am not really sure what else to do—we never kept secrets in life, and I do not want to start keeping them just because you have passed. I guess I just felt a tension around being anything less than perfect, worried about what not being perfect would mean for me and other queer and trans people in my field, and ended up moving so quickly to try and keep ahead of the fear of imperfection as well as the sinking depression I was sliding into because of that ongoing fear. Mom, you have to believe me—I am so thankful that queer and trans people see something in me that gives them hope. Really and truly. And also, you know I never became an academic to be a widely public figure. In fact, I remember telling an ex-boyfriend of

mine how much I was excited to pursue a faculty position because I had joyful visions of me in a dimly lit study, at a table full of papers in an office with built-in bookshelves. A quiet life of the mind was the dream for me. Yes, I wanted to write for public audiences, and I wanted my writing to do things...but I never wanted to be the face of those things. My shyness and introversion only got stronger as I aged, so the public nature of my life and work, and then the heightened intensities of peoples' responses to my life and work because of the publicness of my life and work became incredibly hard to navigate. And of course, this made me just feel like I needed to move even faster, as if I could outpace all these feelings while I wrote more, submitted more, achieved more.

And then three things happened within six months: pandemic lockdowns occurred, I was promoted with tenure, and you died.

After you died, Mom, I started looking at those SLOW signs differently. I began thinking about how you had slowed down your life as a way to live more intentionally. Your spiritual practice allowed you a different mode through which to understand, appreciate, and approach the world. I knew this intellectually, but because I had made a habit of moving quickly through my life, I did not fully understand what this meant as an embodied practice until I went to your house to spread your ashes and prepare the house for sale. I knew being in the house alone would be devastatingly hard. As I thought about being in the house, my mind drifted back to a line I had circled in a *New York Times* article by Taffy Brodesser-Akner: "The thing about small moments is that if you are trained to recognize them, they will kill you dead every time" (p. 16).¹ I thought about it because I knew there were going to be so many small moments, little memories and mementos of you, of us, of everything I missed so much now that you were gone. And yet, I also knew I needed that time with you—just you and me before Adam and his family came the next day. You and I always talked about having a psychic connection, about how we could *feel* each other, even from thousands of miles away. I knew as hard as it would be, I needed to feel you again by being in your space, by taking in those small moments, no matter how much I knew it would kill me. And they did. The moment my shaking hand opened your front door, I was brought to my knees and wept because I could smell your presence. Nag Champa incense. It was quintessentially you, and I just wept, door wide open in the unseasonably beautiful October weather knowing you were with me in that moment. As the sun set that evening, I spoke with my partner on the phone and told her how beautiful Freeses Pond was, how the small moments of the light reflecting off the water and the birds' calls were so calming. I told her I understood why you had moved there and stayed as long as you did, and why you were resistant to moving to Arizona with me, no matter how much I worried about you

slipping on ice in the winter, or about you being lonely during the year, or any other number of worries I had that seemed to grow each year. You stayed there for those small moments, because they reminded you to be slow, gentle, and patient, and that in slowing down, you experienced—you *felt*—the world in deeply enchanting ways. As I talked with M, I felt as though you were there with both of us, Mom. And then, when M drove halfway across the country to stay with me for the last night I would ever have in your house, it felt like you and her got to meet, and that we all had a chance to feel the expansiveness that slowness brings. I remember passing out that night—Adam had the heat turned up, and we had been moving and working all day, and I hadn't had enough water—and I cannot help but think part of why I fainted was that I was bowled over by the intensity of the whole experience. Slowness quite literally knocked me to the floor.

It has been 719 days since you died, Mom. Tomorrow it will have been 720 days, and whenever people read this letter I am writing to you, it will be even further into the past. And yet, I can still *feel* you. I know you are still teaching me things, especially about what it means to live a life I love. I know you don't visit me anymore in my dreams, and for that I am thankful, as I know it means you are at peace and know I will be okay. And I am. Mom, you would have loved M so much—she is exactly the person I want and need. Grrtrude is doing well, too, and I know you'll take good care of her when she passes.² I anticipate you two will take long walks together. And I talk often about you with the people in my life you got to meet and know you would have loved the other folks you didn't get to know beyond our conversations. You are not only with me, but I can feel you here often, reminding me to be SLOW, just like those spray-painted signs on the river path. I know I am not always getting it 'right,' but I also know—because you taught me this through the example of your spiritual practice—that it's about long, patient, and ongoing *practice*.

I am sure you never had any doubt, but I've kept writing, partially because it serves as an enduring connection between you and me. And, of course, I still remember all of the things you taught me, the dishes you used to make, the warmth of your hugs, and the way you'd gently ask me what I learned when I came back from school each day. You were a busy woman, but you never stopped taking time to help me feel good and important in your life. I know, too, that you took great care and effort to get to Macomb to see me graduate with my master's degree, and that nothing was going to stop you from being in the room when I defended my dissertation and became a doctor. You put things on hold for me, Mom, and for that I am eternally grateful. I could not have done any of this without you, and though I know you would never say it was onerous, I know being present with me meant saying no to other people and things. And

this, above all else, is what I keep thinking about during my days now as a deep lesson you are still teaching me. To be present means to be slow. And being slow can, if I let it, help me be present in the wholeness of my life.

I am now in a position where I interact with a lot of doctoral students and new professionals. Many queer and trans students and practitioners often find me, email, or ask for time to meet, and when I can, I do my best to make these connections, especially with other trans girls, women, and femmes. Whenever we meet, they almost all ask me something like: *how do you do it?*, which I know is a way of really asking: *how can I possibly do it?* As I've had these moments over the past two years, I remember what you are still teaching me, and what I read on the river path. I tell them it is important to be slow. Yes, the institution will try to squeeze blood from rocks, and colleagues and supervisors will always try to get more from us. I sometimes tell people that even when we are doing the absolute most, people will always tell us to do more, as my department chair did in my first faculty position. I was writing so much, getting traction with my work, and yet, in our first meeting to review my scholarly progress, she still told me that I "should keep writing more." I didn't really get it at the time because I was so lonely and unhappy, so I did just as I was told, fighting through physical ailments and emotional hurt, thinking it was just part and parcel of what it meant to be an academic. But now I know better. Now I know, because you keep teaching me, that no matter how much I write, or how many speaking engagements I do, or whatever institution or department I work in, I will always be seen as a product, institutionally. Put another way, *the institution will never love me, and the institution is not that from which I should seek love.* This is one of the gifts you have given me by reminding me to go SLOW.

So now I remind students I am often offline on the weekends and encourage them to do the same. I encourage people to not think about quantity in ways that supersede quality. I revel in baking bread slowly, in watching plants grow, and in reading. I am trying to take more time to taste my food, to develop hobbies, and to create healthy boundaries where I view my work as a vocation. This doesn't mean I don't care about what I do, but I am trying to let you keep teaching me to slow down so I can truly live my values rather than continue to be wholly consumed by the institution. I also remind people of wonderful advice my friend Jessica shared with me years ago: *what is for you will not pass you by.* Opportunities don't go away forever, so there is no need to race and rush. I tell people they aren't racing anyone else, so there is no need to—often no benefit to—rushing. Yes, I get that we all have things we want to do quickly/quicker for certain reasons. I sometimes say my only regret from my doctoral work is not being able to finish in time for Grandma, who passed away in my third year. However, that desire was never about feeling like I would miss opportunities if I didn't go faster, but about

wanting Grandma to be with me...and I know, just as I know with you, that she still is. We are all together, the Nicolazzo women, and I am still learning things from her just like I am from you.

Mom, when I was in your house and Adam and I were talking about things we wanted to carry back with us, I knew exactly what I wanted. I found several boxes of incense—Nag Champa, so I could feel you in my new house, which you made possible for me and M—and some amazing photos of you that M and I have put up in our space. I also found a copy of Mary Oliver’s poem “Why I Am Among the Trees” that you had typed out, and that I read before Adam and I spread your ashes. I also found this list you made. The list is so beautiful, Mom, and reminds me of all the ways you practiced slowness and presence. It is full of all these small and slow moments (*drink water; light a candle; read in the hammock; write a poem*), as well as darling reminders (*self-confidence; self-respect; spending less*). I even love the small typos and how you didn’t correct them, or scrap the list and start over (*thank about black jeans*). I framed your list and have it behind me in my home office, just like you were always behind me in all I did and do with my life, even if you didn’t fully understand. I love how, at the very end of the list, you wrote: *begin today!* It reminds me that before we begin, we can



FIGURE 12.2 Items from Mom’s house. Photograph by the author.

gently enter life by taking our time. For you, it was a mantra of all the things you wanted to be aware of and present with; what a gift and lesson for so many of us in the academy.

I also brought home your bench scraper and some glassware, as well as a note you typed on a single piece of heart-shaped note paper. On the paper, you typed six questions, and I've taped the note in a place I can see it regularly when I sit down to do my work. The six questions are an ongoing reminder to (be) SLOW:

- *What are my priorities?*
- *How will I focus my awareness?*
- *How can I measure my success?*
- *Who is depending on me?*
- *What am I forgetting or ignoring?*
- *What is cloudy, foggy, covered up?*

Thank you, Mom. Remembering these small moments are both hard and beautiful. They are a reminder that, as Rabbi Alan Lew said, "Every soul needs to express itself. Every heart needs to crack itself open" (p. 9).³ Thank you for helping me crack open and to remember to be slow. I will always grieve you, but that's not necessarily bad. Maybe there's another way to hear Charlie Brown's iconic exclamation of "*Good grief!*" Maybe there's a way to remember that grief can indeed be good, if only we let it.

I love you to the moon and back,
Z

Notes

- 1 Brodesser-Akner, T. (2019, June 9). My guide to marriage?: A TV classic. *New York Times*, Arts & Leisure, 16–17.
- 2 As you know, Mom, Grr passed suddenly during the writing process of this letter. Over 15 years together, me and her, and yet one is never ready to say goodbye to the very bestest girl there ever was. I take solace each day that stretches on that you and she got to meet that last summer we lived together, when I was listening to my dissertation project interviews over and over again as I drove between your house in New Hampshire and Merrimack College to teach summer classes. I imagine you and her are back together again, with her sleeping next to you as you play Scrabble online. I love you both so much.
- 3 Lew, A. (2018). *This is real and you are completely unprepared: The days of awe as a journey of transformation*. Back Bay Books.