

FIRST PERSON //

A Beautiful Place

■ BY KATE MEYERS

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Snow falls in Pittsburgh: large, beautiful flakes, coming quickly. The white is a pleasant contrast to the usual grayness that seems to pall the city from November until whenever spring decides to show up. This morning my mother asks, “Where do you live, again?” I tell her, “Colorado, Mom. Near Boulder.”

She spends much of her time in bed, so when I’m home for a visit, I often join her there. Last night we relaxed in nightgowns and woolly socks, going through a room-to-room slide show of my house on my laptop as well as pictures of my daughters. She delighted in their faces, in seeing where I had hung the watercolor she gave me on my twenty-first birthday.

Today we go through some of her home decorating magazines. She can’t read anymore, so the *New Yorkers* just sit piled up, but she likes looking at design pictures. We discuss the rooms we like, and why (“lots of bookshelves, lived-in, not too much clutter”).

“Someday you’ll have a house like that,” she says. “I do, Mom,” I say. “I have a house that’s better than that, and you helped me buy it. I wouldn’t have it if it weren’t for you.” She smiles. She still looks beautiful when she smiles.

As the seasons change and her health deteriorates, my mom’s personality seems to drift. It reminds me of the ships we watched during our summers at the Jersey Shore, the point at which, as they closed in on the horizon, the ships disappeared. But it was hard to say exactly where. The doctors, who are used to fixing or making better or solving puzzles, don’t know what to say because there is no making her better. I’ve thought about bringing word games and a computer—things to help her mind from fading—but then I realize she is more peaceful in this fuzzy place, that trying to pull her back into focus would be selfish.

I decide to read to her from a book of Mary Oliver’s poetry. My mom was the one who introduced me to Oliver. I begin with “How Everything Adores Being Alive,” which is about a beetle, or imagining a beetle. “I know one about a beetle,” she says, and starts reciting A.A. Milne’s “Forgiven.” She begins: “I found a little beetle; so that Beetle was his name,/And I called him Alexander and he answered just/The same.” Then I start reciting with her because she read it to me often as a child. “I also remember a very long Milne poem,” she says, “greatest poem of all time.” And she begins to recite all five pages of “King John’s Christmas.” She gets it perfectly.

I could read to her and talk poetry for days. These words are not the pieces that are missing from the puzzle inside her head. She can still appreciate a wonderful sentence or description, or the snow as it falls outside her bedroom window. We are trying not to be sad about the other stuff. After all, does it matter what day it is or what year or what season? Her life, like her wardrobe, has been reduced to bare-bones essentials. What is necessary and what is beautiful, that’s what stays. ■

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