

HI, CHUCK

SHAWN JAEGER

1. ON MY WAY

I found out when I got home from school that day. Junior Prom was that night, so I called my date and told her I couldn't make it. Grand-mom and Grandpop arrived soon after—they were too late.

*That's not where I wanted to begin, though, so let me try again:
It's September, 1990.*

Mary Grace has just finished her first week at the Kentucky Department of Education, and is driving home from work.

She flips on a Panasonic microcassette recorder, and starts talking...

Hi, Chuck. I thought I'd, uh, have a conversation with you on my way home from work today. Actually, so far, the drive home hasn't been too bad but, it still is kind of lonely and, uh, it would really be nice if you were here sitting next to me. Right now, [sigh] I have just crossed the river, and I'm on my way to, 64. This little access route that they built recently, makes it very easy to get from the, Capital Plaza Tower to...the highway. It cuts through, the, uh, commercial district so it's not necessary to, go down through the center of Frankfort and by the State Capital. In some ways that's good, because it seems to cut a few minutes off the trip. And in some ways, it's kind of shame because, the Capital and, the boulevard in front of it are very pretty, and, uh, the houses that line that street, have been there for a long time, and it's, uh, a very lovely little place.

2. WELL

Well, it was an interesting day. I, uh, got my first, big assignment. I was supposed to...provide the information for a report that the Chairman of the Council, his name is, Dr. Stoltz, has to give to the legislative research commission, next week. As I understand it, you know, this council was created as a result of House Bill 940, the Kentucky Education Reform Act—really sweeping piece of legislation. The legislative research commission is headed by Representative Pete Worthington, and they're the oversight committee—their job is to make sure that, the legislation that they in fact wrote, is being carried out.

So, I guess Wednesday of next week is sort of like the first test of, the council and its productivity. So, what I was supposed to do was, put down on paper everything that they had done and then, kind of map out, what it is they need to do in order to, meet the requirements of the legislation.

In 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court deemed the state's public education system unconstitutional.

Per-student spending in poor districts averaged \$1600 less per year than in wealthy districts.

*The reform bill instituted statewide tests, which I took as a 4th grader.
I remember feeling overwhelmed.*

Of course, I wasn't there for some of the, the meetings of the council, and so I had to go back and recreate—looking through the agenda and the various documents—what...they did really do, the accomplishments that they have made so far, which are, few and far between...at this point. And then, I had to look at the legislation and see if I could, chart a path...from here to there, so to speak. Uh...Ron Threadgill, the guy I'm working for, suggested that I do what's called a PERT chart, and I forget that, what that stands for, something like: Performance, Examination, and...

Three years later, the legislature implemented a new test that used ratings instead of percentage grades. Suddenly, almost everyone scored "proficient." The spending gap returned.

I don't know, you probably did them at Tinker all the time. But they're one way, of figuring out where you have to go and what route you need to take to get there.

Chuck worked at Tinker Air Force Base, in Oklahoma City, as a civilian contractor from 1980 to 82.

He did graphic design for officers' presentations: laying out type on film for "viewgraphs." Occasionally, he got to do artwork.

When the colonels came in, Chuck, who opposed Vietnam, didn't stand or turn off the radio.

And I was slightly familiar with the concept. I knew I had some materials, back at Gheens that I had gotten in a class, where we talked about it very generally. It was in conjunction with some, topics on management. So, I pulled out, the information I had—I ran by there this morning—I talked to Bill Barnes, because he has a background in management and to Cheryl because she has an MBA. And they all gave me different ideas of what a PERT chart was supposed to be. Then borrowed a couple of textbooks from Bill and I did a mockup, and then faxed it to, uh, Frankfort so Ron could look at it, and then I, zipped back over here.

Mary Grace worked at Gheens as a Technology Teacher. She appeared in an educational ad on the cover of the phone book, observing three kids huddled around an Apple II. Two white boys sit at the keyboard; a Black boy points at the screen from behind...

And to make a long story short, I don't think he really, liked what I did too much, but at least it got the ball rolling, so. I don't know, eh, it's funny, I go back and forth, part of me says, "Hey, you're doing fine! You've only been working for this guy for four days, so, the fact that you were able to productively sit down today and, and work on a task together is a good sign." You really can't read his mind, yet, even though I consider that part of what my responsibilities will be eventually, I, I can't be expected to be able to do that yet. Uh, part of me was saying that this is easy, I can do this, this is no big deal, uh, anybody could do this, and then part of me is saying, but this does take some skill and, and it's challenging to do it right, so I don't know, I guess my point in saying all of this is that, looking back over the week so far, um...I guess I'd myself maybe like a six on a scale of 1 to 10. I, I'm doing okay, not great yet, but, but okay, not embarrassingly badly, but not...fantastically yet either yet, uh...

I'm taking notes, though, I hope someday that, when I'm in a position to have resources, like a person like myself, I'll um, I'll have learned from this experience. I'll have learned how to be direct, with the people that are working, for me and with me, and I'll be clear about what I want, and I'll be able to, take advantage of their skills and their abilities, uh...I'm not trying to complain about the guy I'm working for because, you know, he's adjusting too, it's just that, um...well, suffice it to say that in a few weeks I'm sure we'll be a lot more simpatico then we are right now, but uh, all in all it's not been an entirely bad week, and uh...and I guess I'm glad I'm doing this.

3. BACK AND FORTH

BACK AND FORTH

I didn't want to...make this whole tape be about work though, I wanted it to be about you and me. And us, and, where we are, and why we're doing what we're doing. Uh, [laugh] like everything else, it seems like, you have to kind of laugh, because otherwise you'd, you'd go nuts. For one thing, here I am driving, every day, back and forth to Frankfurt,

and...again, part of me rebels against that idea, I mean I hate the idea of using so much gas, and I hate the expense. Even though I'm not ultimately gonna pay for it, it seems, a shame to be wasting these natural resources. Especially in view of what's going on in the Middle East.

Why else do you have to laugh?

Because your husband works night shift, so he leaves for work after you get home...

Because 30 years later, the United States is still in the Middle East...

Because waste is inescapable...

Because the means eclipse the ends...

On the other hand, it's a really pretty ride. It's, it's highway, obviously, but it's through...well, you know what it looks like, it's through these farmlands and rolling hills, and of course the trees are just magnificent, and, all week it's been sunny, so it's been pleasant.

Like Mary Grace, I've also worked in education and commuted.

Most of the time, of course, I listen to the radio, and I really enjoy those news and public affairs programs, so, I feel like, my mind's engaged, and I'm, learning new things.

*My first teaching job is at a university outside Boston—
seven hours door to door from Manhattan.*

I don't own a car, so I take Megabus and Amtrak.

Amtrak is a really pretty ride.

Once outside the city, it's mostly along Long Island Sound.

Sit on the right, and you'll see tall grasses swaying in the breeze of tidal marshes; clean white sailboats bobbing unused at their moorings; and lots of birds—herons, egrets, swans, plovers, sandpipers, cormorants, and gulls.

Sit on the left, and you'll see rusted-out factories and gutted warehouses. You'll see unconscionable poverty on the outskirts of New Haven, followed, moments later, by the wealth and privilege of people departing there for Yale. In a country built for automobiles, trains reveal what is intended to be kept out of sight: graffitied cinder-block walls; shopping carts full of plastic bags filled with plastic bags filled with old newspapers and clothes; improbable weeds pushing through ruptured asphalt; abandoned tree-stands; disused refrigerators; and the carapaces of old cars.

Uh, I do have some time to think, and once I get in the habit of using this little device, maybe I can even start, recording some of those short stories I'm always writing in my head, or...maybe having conversations like I am right now with you, where we can, trade ideas about, things that we want to do, or problems that we're having, or projects that we want to take on.

OUR BIGGEST PROJECT

And I guess our, our biggest project right now are those two little kids. I, I still get knocked out every time I think about myself as being a mom and having, having two boys. I, um...I can't help but get a little teary when I think about it because, uh...I don't know it's, it's so miraculous. And they're so beautiful. [sigh]

Have you noticed how she talks?

How Mary Grace will start a new thought, then immediately pause?

Or how she'll repeat the word she paused on after resuming?

*It feels simultaneously casual and considered—
like something an actor would do for effect.*

I, uh...much like you, I think, get frustrated with Shawn.

*Did I mention I'm Mary Grace's son?
She was 35 when she made the tape.
I'm 35 now.*

*She had a mortgage, a marriage of ten years, and two kids.
I rent a studio apartment, my marriage of ten years fell apart, and I have no kids.*

I, I have to take some ownership of that frustration: lots of times it's because I'm tired or grumpy, or...I don't have the energy to, uh, to explain something to him for the 95th time, or to argue with him about what he wants, or why he can't have what he wants, which is usually more often the case. But, uh, all in all, he continues to amaze me. He's, he's bright and funny and sensitive, and inquisitive, and...I know that has everything to do with the fact that...he's gotten lots of time and attention.

I don't what to say about Joshua [laughs], accept that I continue to try to be positive, but he's, he's a challenge, I guess I'll leave it at that.

4. OUT THERE

All that brings me to the fact that...as always, I'm, I'm grateful, too, for the sacrifices that you've made. I don't how you, motivate yourself to get out there every night. Be out there in the cold, be out there in the wet, be out there in the heat...be out there in the wind.

And how you...how you don't give in...to the discouragement [tape skip] that I know you must be feeling, especially right now...

*If you've ever sent something or received something via UPS,
chances are it went through Louisville, Kentucky—
home of UPS's Worldport.*

The largest automated package handling facility in the world, Worldport covers 90 football fields with 155 miles of conveyor belts, and processes 2 million packages a day (4 million during peak holiday shipping).

Chuck and Mary Grace marry in 1980.

IBM introduces the PC in 1981.

UPS begins Next Day Air in 1982,

and that same year, Chuck and Mary Grace move to Louisville.

Chuck works part-time doing graphic design at a printing press, and takes classes in dark-room techniques that become almost instantly obsolete, thanks to the PC. In 1984, Mary Grace becomes pregnant.

Chuck quits the printing press for a job at UPS—twice the pay, and full health benefits.

Everyone starts out in sorting; to get hired, you have to memorize zip codes for the entire United States.

Mary Grace makes flashcards and quizzes Chuck; he passes the test.

Chuck moves from sorting to Container Repair, then Aircraft Fueling.

By 1990, Chuck is sleeping 3 hours a day.

He takes care of me and my brother while Mary Grace is at work, sleeps when she gets home, then works night-shift at UPS.

Chuck was an artist, a hippie.

He didn't dream of fueling airplanes for 30 years—

he dreamed of psychedelic illustrations, like Peter Max.

He gave that up for me.

He took a job he didn't care about—a job that put him out in the elements night after night and ruined his body—to make my life better.

Josh and I set up dad's drafting table and art supplies in the basement for his birthday one year.

We thought we were encouraging him, but he didn't have the time or energy to draw, and he'd always struggled getting ideas, anyway.

The one thing he drew was himself, asleep in bed, surrounded by phantoms...

5. REWARD

I don't want to get back into that discussion of...of how much we both needed that vacation in August but, uh, but I keep feeling like you need a reward,

Two years after the tape, we go to Florida for spring break.

Chuck drives overnight to our ocean-view room at a 3-story condo in Fort Walton Beach.

you know, I, I get reward from what I'm doing, because...generally I enjoy it, and generally I find it stimulating, and, and generally there's, uh, there's compensation for me in...in the products, that come out of what I do. And also, there's that sense, on a higher level, that maybe, somehow, I'm contributing to, the common good. And, generally that's enough for me.

Josh and I, thrilled to be at the beach, immediately get severe sunburns.

We watch the NCAA basketball championship one evening.

It's between the University of Kentucky, located in Chuck's hometown of Lexington, and Duke.

Uh, look at those jerseys.

I know.

about what you're doing. Things that incline you, or disincline you, rather...uh...uh, toward, uh, wanting to keep on doing it. And, uh, and I feel like, there should something in it for you and, it's not like you even to get to spend the money that you make, on things that...would bring you pleasure. Uh, you end up spending them on, the necessities of life, and uh... I wish that could be different, I wish you could sock some of that money away every week so that you could buy a boat and uh...I don't know, get a CD player or, purchase some toys...the way Marc is able to do, or has been able to do in the past.

*By 2009, Chuck is in the best shape of his life—
cycling along the Ohio River and working out on the Soloflex he purchased on eBay.
Out of nowhere, he begins experiencing excruciating back pain.
He can't pin it on a precipitating event, but it almost has to be work-related:
this is someone who slung packages and lugged jet-fuel hoses for 30 years.
He goes into early retirement, without disability pay.
Three spinal fusions later, the pain remains.
And he's not supposed to ride a bicycle.*

6. IF I COULD

IF I COULD

I don't know if you remember or not,
we used to play a game,
it was a long time ago, about
giving each other things,
you know, we would...

we would see something, in the store window that we knew we couldn't have and,
certainly...we'd probably never be able to afford—maybe it was a building, or uh...
a beautiful thing in nature, and, and we'd give it to each other? Do you remember?

And I'd see, uh, a neat building and you'd say, "Well, it's yours. I give it to you," and,

I guess that's what I'd like to say. I, uh, I know...

right now, we're so focused on...

paying the bills, and putting a money, putting money away for future emergencies, and

taking care of the needs of the kids,

it seems frivolous to talk about...anything that doesn't...[lip smack]

in the end get represented in dollars and cents.

But if I could,

I would give you a lot of wonderful things and,

since I can't, I wanna give them to you,

that way we used to give things to each other.

[lip smack] Uh...ironically enough,

the thing that's in least supply, the thing that's the most valuable, and the thing that...

we have...the least to spend, is time...

IF I HAD IT

If I had it, I would give you...oh, I'd give you lots of hugs, and I'd give you, [sigh] pats on the back, and I'd give you lots of tickles, and digs, and...Doberman pinches and...and I'd give you, uh, breakfasts, and I'd even include fried eggs...I'd give you, uh, lunches, at, at nice, nice restaurants, with sun coming in the windows, and, some kind of...jazz-rock-fusion music playing in the background, and, um...Tanqueray and tonics.

And, uh, afternoons of window shopping, maybe, hikes in Bernheim Forest...And long trips in the car with adamant discussions about...things we both care about. And plenty of opportunities for...uh, [sigh] deadpanning, and playing tricks on each other.

And not to mention...opportunities to, snuggle and, get under the covers at the same time...chances to hold each other through the night, and wake up together in the morning...

Maybe, uh, watching those, those guys, Siskel & Ebert, together, or *This Old House*, or...even some junk TV.

Doing things by ourselves, and doing things with the kids.

Uh...listening to music together...on the floor in the basement.

Maybe just sitting on the couch and reading magazines at the same time, but...with your head in my lap, or, my head on your shoulder.

I CAN'T IMAGINE

Those are all the kinds of things that, [sigh] I would love to give to you...

And they almost,
as simple as they are, seem like,
incredible extravagances.

I, can't imagine what it would be like...

to go on a date,
where we went to a concert,
and went out to dinner afterwards,
and didn't have to worry about getting home,
and when we did,
could go right to bed,
or sit up and watch a late movie and,
and both of us be,
awake at the same time,
and tired at the same time,
I mean, that would just be...incredible.

It, it puts all those days of our early relationship into focus.

7. DOLLARS AND CENTS

Josh and I grew up at Mary Grace's jobs.

After Frankfort, she was Assistant Principal at Moore High School.

We'd attend football games in the fall, and basketball and volleyball in the winter.

When the gym's hardwood needed resurfacing, Mary Grace got Chuck to paint the half-court mascot—a mustang.

After Moore, Mary Grace was Principal at Western Middle School.

On weekends and throughout the summer, Mary Grace would drag Josh and me there—bribing us with a 20-piece Chicken McNugget—so that she could get some extra work done. Josh and I would play hide-and-go seek, roaming the vast 3-story building, which, dark and empty, scared me.

We'd play basketball in the humid gym, honing our attempt at Jordan's fadeaway jumper.

We'd play Oregon Trail in the computer lab on Macintosh Performas.

And we'd watch The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe on VHS in the library's staff room.

Mary Grace brought me to one of Western's after-school dances.

I must have been in 2nd or 3rd grade.

I remember two girls pointed and laughed at my butterfly dance moves, which I'd seen on TV and practiced down in the basement, in front of a mirror.

In 1995, we go back to Fort Walton Beach for spring break.

No sunburns this time.

But, Mary Grace notices a lump on her breast.

She schedules an appointment for an exam back home.

The lump is biopsied.

She has breast cancer.

She's 39.

The doctors perform a single mastectomy.

She wakes from the operation to learn the cancer has entered her bloodstream.

She takes a leave of absence from Western.

A series of treatments follow:

radiation, chemotherapy, and a bone marrow transplant.

Chuck drops us off at SuperCuts before we see her for the first time after the transplant.

Josh gets a "nice-boy" buzz-cut that leaves him fuming afterward.

We wash our hands and put booties on over our shoes before entering the ICU.

*Jaundiced and feeble, Mary Grace has put red lipstick on for our visit—
simultaneously moving and bizarre.*

Do you have any sense of what the total cost of all of that was?

Uh...

You ever look, like, try to figure...I mean...it's kinda weird, but—

It was over a million dollars.

Yeah...wow.

All the hospital costs and everything. Because, like I said, that was, that was hairy.

Yeah.

And, um, I was freaked out about it, and...your mom was, too. And course I was just like, I said, "Look, you just, you get, get yourself better."

Yeah.

I said, "The worst-case scenario is, is that we just make payments."

Yeah.

"You know, from here on—fifty dollars a month, or whatever."

Right.

"And they'll get tired of that after a while, and they'll write it off.

It's what they do. And, so if, you know, if we have to a, a payment once a month for the next thirty years, so what? You know? As long as we're making a good-faith effort to pay on it, nothing too horrible's gonna happen. So,

you concentrate on gettin' better, I'll concentrate on what's on the mailbox. Don't worry about it! Be happy!" You know, but boy, yeah, I dreaded every day opening that damn mailbox.
I bet.

*Slowly, the white blood cell count on the dry-erase board climbs,
The hair grows back, thicker and curlier than before.
But the cancer doesn't go away—it comes back with her.
The oncologist says no one in her situation lives more than five years...*

*From that point forward, Mary Grace refuses to speak of cancer.
She denies its existence.
She starts a doctorate in educational administration, with the goal of becoming superintendent. And she maxes-out her life insurance policy.*

*Bill Barnes—remember him from Gheens?—retires from his position as Director of the Computer Education Support Unit.
Mary Grace takes over, and Josh and I go with her:
we admire the Think Different posters above Steve's desk, we rollerblade and skateboard in the gym, and I practice violin downstairs in the empty preschool classrooms.*

*Mary Grace worked hard; maybe too hard.
That's not to say she was a bad parent: she drove me to soccer practices and violin concerts, and told me how proud she was of my straight-A report cards.
But I don't have many memories of time at home with her as a kid.*

*Was she terrified that if she slowed down, the cancer would catch up?
Death is always off in the distance, but when you know it's coming, how do you deal? It seemed she didn't know how to rest anymore.*

All the simple things she says she wants to give to Chuck—were they really so unattainable? Were a few afternoons reading magazines on the couch really “incredible extravagances”?

The Computer Education Support Unit’s offices were located in the Lyndon Education Center. In 2003, JCPS renamed the building the Mary Grace Jaeger Education Center.

In 2018, CES was restructured, and its offices moved to a new location.

The Phoenix School of Discovery opened onsite.

The building’s façade still bears Mary Grace’s name, but searching for “Mary Grace Jaeger Education Center” online yields no results.

A strange kind of limbo—half there, half gone.

Chuck sometimes drives over there on Sundays, parks in the lot out front, and sits for a while.

8. THAT ONENESS

I, I, you know, I, I don’t look back with regret, uh,
I mean there were, there were times when,
I guess, we didn’t appreciate what we had,
but then there were times when we did, and we,
we used our time well together.

Um,...I know you’re not as crazy as I am about entertaining
but I think back, too, about the times when we did, have friends over, and,
and we enjoy the company of friends together, and
and we got to, uh, sit next to each other,
and exchange...private looks, and laugh at...
the common language that we share,
and, you know, the, the kind of, uh,...

the setting, the frame that, that being with other people puts around your relationship.

The, uh, the way, it helps you...
see in, in clear focus what you enjoy together and how...
how your relationship is special,
when it's compared, or, put in contrast with,
the relationships of other people.

I, it's that, that twoness,
that oneness, maybe, that,
that you feel, especially strongly when,
when you're with other ones and twos.

The trees along here are just [sigh]...are simply beautiful. Each one is a different color, and
all the shades are [tape skip] so vibrant.

9. LOOK BACK

Chuck goes by Chuck, but his given name is something else.

His mother divorces and re-marries when he's young.

The family moves from Evergreen Park, just south of Chicago, to Detroit, and then to Lexington, Kentucky.

A "greaser" with pegged jeans and slicked-back hair, Chuck rides motorcycles and blasts MC5 on his stereo.

He takes his stepfather's surname when he turns 18.

So, neither of his names are what they once were.

He drops out of the University of Kentucky after a semester, hangs around Lexington, then applies to VISTA—Volunteers in Service to America. In August, 1977, he drives his '64 Volkswagen Beetle to Oklahoma City for training.

Mary Grace is the first of five children—four of whose names begin with M-A-R: there's Mary Grace, Michele, Martina, Margaret, and Mark. She's born in Philadelphia, but grows up in Rockaway, New Jersey. She studies theatre at Montclair State University, and graduates in 1977. She moves out to Oklahoma City for VISTA, arriving a few months before Chuck.

VISTA wages are modest, supplemented with food stamps. Chuck's first apartment is in a garage.

He and Mary Grace start dating—

They listen to jazz at Bianca's, play pente at VZD's. They get married in 1980.

Mary Grace wants to move back to the East Coast, to be closer to family and New York City. But Chuck doesn't like big cities.

He has friends in Louisville, so they decide to move there—a compromise that becomes a life.

Later, at Dr. Mary Grace's work events, Chuck sometimes feels uncomfortable.

When asked what he does, he says he's an "aerospace petroleum transfer engineer"—a snappier line than "I fuel airplanes out at UPS."

He has the sense no one can fathom why Mary Grace has chosen him.

He jangles the loose change and utility knife in his pants pocket.

Chuck takes on most of the domestic labor.

He cooks chicken cacciatore and fettucine alfredo, and makes party mix for the holidays.

*He's been smoking and drinking since his early teens, but quits both.
He comes home on Saturday morning after another week at UPS with the latest Star Wars
action figure for his sons.*

10. WHO YOU WERE

I can think back to, uh,...
to right around this time...
about 13 years ago, when I...
started to pay attention to you. I,

I knew you,
and I had gotten to know you a little better,
I was conscious of you,
but then all of a sudden, right about now,
you just really,
took a major place in my consciousness.

And, uh,...
gosh, I,
I suddenly began to think of you a lot,
a lot, uh, all the time,
uh, constantly, until...
I was a little bit obsessed with,

with who you were,
and what you wore,
and what you said,
and how you moved, and



I still didn't know if you were...

if you were shy,
or you were just reserved,
or if you were...

if you were so self-possessed that you didn't need to say a lot,
because you were so aware of who you were, and,
and I think all of those things were true, alternately.

It certainly, certainly,
at certain times one was more true than another, but,
but I was fascinated [by...]

but I was fascinated [by...]
by your silence...
by who you were,
what you stood for...

You were very different from anybody I had,
ever met before,
and I was very fascinated...

CHORUS
CHORUS

And, uh...and even before I was attracted to you in a physical sense, and, and that happened
very quickly...I was, attracted to...how resolute you were...I was attracted to some values
that, weren't necessarily my values... [growing fainter, stopping]

...hey...Grace.....was...the tape...[sniffle]...[rewind sound]...[clipping]

11. ALL OF A SUDDEN

That's how the tape ends.

So, what happened?

Did the batteries run out?

And if so, did Mary Grace notice?

The drive from Frankfort is about 48 minutes.

The tape is about 25 minutes.

Maybe she kept talking...

And if so, what did she say?

The other voice at the end is Chuck's.

He was doing a test for a response he never recorded.

And it seems Mary Grace never recorded again, either.

So, the tape's gone unanswered for 30 years.

And I'm not Chuck, but I have a recorder.

And I have some things to say...

You had me drive the three of us downtown that morning.

As I said goodbye, you nearly fainted walking from the passenger side to the driver's side.

You dropped Josh off, and went to work.

When I got back from school, you were already home.

You were on the floor, leaned up against the couch.

You were hot—dad had fans going and the sliding door open even though it was a mild spring afternoon.

*You said you wanted a milkshake, so I drove to Dairy Queen and got you one.
Your fingers and lips started turning blue.
Dad realized he needed to get you to the emergency room.
I put your arm over my shoulder and carried you out to the car.
Your body was limp and surprisingly light.
Even so, I nearly fell over getting you into dad's SUV.*

*After dad pulled out of the driveway, I went back into the house, put my head down on the kitchen counter, in the corner where the pizza coupons and utility bills piled up, and started crying.
I slammed my fist on the counter over and over again.
I knew the cancer had been spreading, but you were at work that morning...*

*Then, something happened.
I stopped crying.
I did my homework.
It was like none of it ever happened.
Josh was rehearsing Titus Andronicus that evening.
He got home late, and we went to bed.
Around 1am, I heard noises—someone was in the house.
With no parents home, I was really scared.
But it was Rick.
He told us to get up and follow him to the hospital.*

*Dad was in the hallway when we arrived.
He told us to go in and talk to you.
He hadn't seen you since pulling up to the ER,
but he wanted us to have time alone with you.*

You were attached to machines, and you were unresponsive.

I didn't know what to do.

I just said, "Hang in there, mom. I love you."

Dad didn't know what to do, either.

He'd barely spoken with the doctors.

He told us to go home and get ready for school.

"I found out when I got home from school that day."

Dad sat me down on the corner of his bed and started crying.

"Junior Prom was that night, so I called my date and told her I couldn't make it."

My rental tuxedo sat unused in the closet.

"Grand-mom and Grandpop arrived soon after."

They got the first flight from New Jersey, but—

"They were too late."

Dad told them he could have tried to resuscitate you, but he chose not to.

They said he made the right decision.

Dad's biological father showed up that evening from Milwaukee.

He'd been drinking up at the bar by the Winn-Dixie.

He slept in Josh's room, staining the sheets with iodine he used to dress a wound.

Your body was prepared for an open-casket viewing.

When Dad approached, it was all he could do not to scream:

the mortician had put your favorite blouse on backward.

Your work colleagues were stunned—they'd been in meetings with you days ago.

Person after person said, "If there's anything I can do, let me know."

*But I didn't know what I needed, and even if I had, I'm not sure I could have asked for it.
I needed to be held like a baby, I needed to scream.
But something kept holding me back.*

*I chose the music for your funeral at St. Edwards.
I played "Meditation" from Thais for the Offertory;
Carolyn accompanied me on the organ.
I practiced down in the basement the night before, watching my bow arm in the mirror.
I just wanted to play well.
Playing well would mean that I was going to be well—that I was resilient.*

*I'm not mad at Dad.
He was alone and in shock.
But I never got to say goodbye to you...at least not in the way I would have wanted.
I wish I was there when you died.
I know it would have been scary, but it would have been us—the four of us—together.*

*I wish you could see me now.
I wish you could hold me...just hold me for a long time.
And tell me it's okay—
okay to be scared,
okay to bang my fist on the countertop,
okay to not do my homework,
to skip school,
to go back to the hospital instead,
to not be afraid my pain would make me unlovable,
to play out of tune...*

*More than anything, I wish I could talk to you...
But, maybe I can.
Maybe I can play a game.
Maybe I can give myself the thing I can't have—
in the way you and dad used to give things to each other.*

12. A CONVERSATION

Mom? Hello?
Hi, Shawn.

Mom? Is it really you?
It's me, your mom.

Mom, I made something with your tape! We're actually in it right now. I hope that's okay?
Gosh, uh, there's some pretty private things in the tape.

*I know the tape was meant for dad, but you say so many beautiful things. And I wanted
people to hear it. And I wanted to spend time with you, or at least your voice.*
That's nice, Shawn.

Mom, I was married for 10 years to a woman I deeply loved. And now I'm divorced.
I can't imagine what that must feel like.

*Well, I can't imagine what it must have felt like knowing you only had a few years left to live
after the bone marrow transplant.*
I did what I could.

You did so much, but, if you could do it over again, would you do it differently? I mean, why did you work so hard?

Everything I was building—everything I was looking toward—I knew I would not see. It was a way to have a sense of ownership.

But mom, if you knew you wouldn't see it, why did you keep building, keep looking forward? You were so determined to make the most of the time that you didn't spend the time you had with us.

I wish I'd had more time with you and Joshua.

But do you get what I'm saying? We didn't need you to be strong, we just needed you!

I hear you.

I'm sorry, it's just that spending all this time with your tape has made me realize how much I missed you back then, and how much I still miss you now.

I love you, Shawn.

I love you, too. And, you know, I'm realizing I did the same thing that you did. When dad drove you to the hospital that night, I was so scared of falling apart that I refused to acknowledge it was happening. I stopped crying; I did my homework. It was a way to have a sense of ownership.

Most people, especially kids, can't deal with things that are not clear.

You were doing what you could.

Yeah, I guess so. But now that we've talked, I don't want to do that anymore. I want to fall apart, because then I can become something new.

Mom, I've missed you so much. It's so good to talk to you.

Mom? Are you still there?

13. IT STILL IS

instrumental

[tape sample: "It still is kinda lonely and, uh, it would really be nice if you were here sitting next to me."]

14. ALL IN ALL

instrumental

[tape sample: "All in all, he continues to amaze me. He's, he's bright and funny and sensitive, and inquisitive."]

