

Dear Mom,

How are you? I miss you a lot. I miss everything about you. I miss your smile, your laugh, your smell, your jokes, everything. It's been exactly half a year since I last saw you and at first I was angry that you left me, but now I know it wasn't your fault at all. I know you never wanted to leave me, but now I know that maybe this was just the way things were supposed to work out. It's like fate or something. I know you always said to me that everything always happens for a reason, and the reason for you leaving is becoming more and more apparent to me every single day.

I've been doing okay. For about a month, I was literally depressed. I still went to school, but I just kept replaying old memories that I had, and still have, of you and me. I would remember the brilliant times we had together and those would make me cry. I also remembered the tragic fights and arguments we had and that also brought the tears. All memories made me incredibly sad. It looked like I couldn't win either way.

Then, one day, Kim and Heather came over and told me how much they cared about me and how much they missed you, too, and that we could all move on together, and that I surely wasn't alone at all. That made me come out of my own little world and start healing and start experiencing things that I would never have experienced if I didn't come out of my shell. These have been the most eventful six months of my entire life. Ever since you left, it's like I'm a totally different person. I'm not that timid teenager anymore. Now I'm outgoing, adventurous, and I'm even trying not to be picky with what I eat. I know you would be proud of me for that one.

I haven't gone back to our condo, but others have. We didn't sell it or anything. We still own it, but we did sell lots of the furniture and random things that were inside.

We sold our beautiful vermilion leather couch with the intricate white flower designs that you painted on yourself, we sold the dusty blue recliner that we used to fight over because it was so comfortable, we sold your antique china cabinet, we sold your queen bed with the paisley olive pattern comforter, we sold your wooden dresser, and we sold all of our artwork that was hanging on the walls. I begged them not to sell your favorite painting, I swear I did. You know the white one with all the rainbow abstract that you could just stare at for literally hours? But apparently that one was going to sell for way more than it was worth, so naturally, your brother and sisters decided to sell it. Don't worry, though. I begged them (literally, I was groveling on my hands and knees) not to sell your vanity, no matter how much it was worth. I know that was your favorite thing in the world. It had everything so neatly arranged, and there were so many memories there, that I just couldn't bear to see it go. So now, it's still sitting in the condo, waiting for me to come pick it up. I haven't had the courage to face the condo yet, but when I do, I will put that vanity in my room, front and center, so everyone can see it. But, like I said, I haven't come that far yet.

I do have a boyfriend for the first time ever. This is also new and exciting and weird for me, but I know you would be jumping for joy if you were here because you couldn't wait for the day when your little girl got a real boyfriend. His name is Josh McNulty. I know for a fact that you would love him. He is tall, skinny, and has green eyes and sandy blonde hair. We have only been "dating"-I hate that word- for about a month, and it might just be a summer fling, but it's real. Anyway, I know you would want me to be all corny right now, but I'm not going to falter that easily. I'm still the same person I was in some ways.

Kim and Heather are the same. They are still my best friends. I feel the need to update you about them because I know you loved them like they were your own daughters. They certainly hung around our house enough as you would always say. I know you secretly loved it.

Heather is still the star player on the varsity volleyball team. She is passionate about it now more than ever. Her coach tells her that she has the best serve in all of Illinois. I know that you always went to the games to watch me play -and fail miserably- but I quit. I know that ultimately I was dragging the team down, and now they are number one in the state. See, I was right about one thing, wasn't I? Anyway, since Heather's mom is always working, Kim and I go to all of her games and tournaments to cheer her on. Her ultimate goal is to be on the Olympic beach volleyball team, and with the way she is playing now, she already has a spot.

Kim is still drawing and painting and sculpting like crazy. I just know she is going to be one of those art gallery snobs one day. She will draw on everything from desks to sidewalks. When she sees a piece of wire on the street, she'll pick it up and start sculpting it into something amazing. The best part is that she is actually talented and that shows in her work. Plus, she is really committed and she really is passionate about it. I'm convinced she would die for her artwork. In fact, the other day she drew a breath-taking picture of you. It was just sketched in pencil, but it was so intricate and the details were astonishing. I had it framed and I put it up in my new room in Aunt Rachel's house. I already had some pictures of you that I framed and put on dressers and things like that, but now it's like you're watching over me, and I love that.

The other day, I saw Julie for the first time. She told me that she went over to our condo and cleaned a little bit. She gave me your Tresor perfume, your Fatal Apple lipstick, and your manicure card that you would get punched every week when you went to get your manicure. --- One more punch and I get a free manicure!-

I will never forget the time when I asked you why you got the same color every week, which I remember perfectly matched your lipstick, and you said to me, “Honey, every Wednesday I get my nails done. That’s the only thing I know for sure will happen every week. I need some kind of order in my life, now don’t I?” and then I would respond by saying that of course, you were right. As you always were.

Anyway, Julie came by and dropped those things off and then she told me that whatever I needed, she was there for. Let me tell you, in the past six months, about a million people have told me that, and I didn’t believe a single one of them. I didn’t think they understood what I was going through at all, and I haven’t called a single one of them. When Julie said it to me, I completely believed her. I can’t tell you why, but it was just something about the way she said it that made me believe her. She knows just as much about you as I do, maybe even more, and I know that I can talk to her about anything. I understand now why you guys were best friends. She reminds me of you in so many ways.

Oak Lawn is pretty much the same as it always has been. Not really any news worthy gossip. Well, Mrs. Adkins got a nose job and she is trying to deny it, which is pretty funny. Whenever she is asked she just shrugs it off and says, “Maybe in the future!” I know that you would find this funny because that was just your sense of humor. I know that you would keep asking her and find it comical each time she denied it. I don’t think I’ll ever understand why you thought things were funny when no one else did, but it didn’t matter because as soon as you started laughing, everyone else would start too. Your laughter was so contagious. As soon as you cackled, everyone else would start laughing at that cackle, even if the story or joke wasn’t funny. That’s why so many people loved you. Plus, you had the best one-liners ever. I miss those.

Uncle Greg is doing okay, if you were wondering. I know you kind of fell out with him, but I love him, and we do stuff together now which I think is a great step for both of us. He always tells me stories about your childhood with him and he has the best stories ever. Sometimes it is really obvious when he is making things up, but I still enjoy the stories anyway. He says he doesn't remember anything past when you moved out as soon as you turned eighteen, but he just remembers feeling really sorry because he felt like he let everyone down. He really is sorry for betraying your family. I can see that in his eyes every time he says it. He is clean and sober now and I hope that it's okay that I'm talking to him about you. I just never knew him for the first part of my life, and I feel like I have so much to catch up on. I don't want any tension between anyone, so I feel like I need to build bridges with more people than Uncle Greg. I thought that was a place to start, though.

The other day, I was thinking about that one time, when I was about eight, and I had chicken pox, and that whole week I was whiney and just complained nonstop. But, still, that whole week, you never left my side. One night, we were watching *The Bachelor*, and I forgot who was the bachelor at that time, because there have been so many, and you said, "Maura, don't ever go on TV. You are way too good for that. Make something of your life, Maura. Don't go on TV looking for love that won't last anyway. You are capable of so much, and you have so many people who love you. I mean, no matter what I'll be proud of you. You are so good."

I don't think I will ever forget that. I don't exactly know what I'm going to be when I grow up, I mean, I am only sixteen, but I want to be a nurse. I remember when you were in the hospital and all the nurses were genuinely kind to both of us. They understood that it was so difficult to deal with, and they were just a buzz away. They talked to you like you were a person, not just a patient, and they talked to me like I was an adult, not just some dumb teenager who

deserved everything that was coming her way. I know they would've given their life for you if they could. And you know what? They all showed up to your funeral, too. All six of them. I want to be that person for someone else. I want to make people feel like they are not alone. I want to share my story with other kids and comfort them. That's what I want to do for the rest of my life.

Living with Aunt Rachel isn't as bad as I thought it would be. She is a good cook, she helps me with my homework, and drives me places, gives me money for things, takes me shopping, and all the other things you're not here to do. She even took me to get a homecoming dress. It was way too extravagant, but since she doesn't have kids, I feel like I'm a good substitute. The dress is a light blue gown with pick-ups and extreme sparkles. I didn't want that dress, but it was a nice gesture and I wore it anyway. I'm not saying I'm glad you're gone at all, but everything is turning out okay. She is really nice to me, and yes, unfortunately I still have to do chores and I still have a curfew, but I wasn't expecting to get rid of those things just because you're gone. At first it seemed like nothing could ever be normal again, but sometimes change can be good. Your passing helped me realize this.

When I first returned to school, everyone had obviously heard what happened, and although they gave me pitiful looks when you were diagnosed with Stage four cancer, this was different. Bad different. They all made me cards, hugged me, told me that I could talk to them, or whatever, but none of the gestures felt sincere. I didn't even know half the people that were "sorry" my mother died. That's what I hated, and still hate, most of all. When people say "sorry" to me, that's a word that has lost meaning. I mean, what are they sorry for exactly? They didn't give you cancer or wish you were dead. They didn't even know you! I knew Kim and Heather were the only ones who were truly and sincerely sorry because I knew that your loss affected them as well.

My teachers gave me leeway for assignments, tests, quizzes, and miscellaneous assignments, which I appreciated, but I also wanted to be treated like a normal student. I only missed about a week of school for the wake and the funeral, but really I was checked out for a month or so in class. I could have made that week up in one or two days, but I was grateful for the pushed back assignments because I wasn't really paying attention. Some teachers said that I didn't have to turn in the assignments at all, but I did because I felt like if I didn't, I would just be wallowing in self pity, which was what I had been doing for a month.

After your death, all I wanted to do was move on, but at times, I found myself just crying for no reason other than missing you, and that was the hardest part to get over. I'm still not over it. I don't know if I ever will be.

I know you never wanted to leave me, but I know it wasn't your fault. Heaven is much better than Earth, anyway, probably. Certainly a lot more people to keep you company. Especially your favorite actress of all time, Marilyn Monroe. And your favorite singer of all time, Whitney Houston, just died, so hopefully all of you guys are friends. That would be so cool.

A couple of months ago, I read this book called "Heaven is for Real" and the little boy apparently died for like four minutes and then started to describe heavenly things to his parents that didn't have an explanation other than he went to Heaven. I think it might be a money thing, but anyway, if it's real, Heaven sounds pretty cool. This little boy, I think his name was Colton Burpo, said that everyone had wings because they were angels, and no one had glasses, and there were unicorns that had a rainbow pattern. If this is true, then I will be delightfully surprised. And now, when I die, I will get to see you, which will be so nice to be with you again. I still love you so much. Although you're gone, I know a little piece of you is always with me. It's like you're

my guardian angel or something.

I know that you'll probably never read this letter, but I needed to write it because I feel like by doing this, I at least gain some sort of closure. I can imagine your reaction to some of the things I wrote to you, I can imagine you in Heaven looking down on me. I will never, ever, forget you. That's a promise. As you used to say to me every night, I love you to the moon and back. Always.

Love, your one and only daughter,

Maura