

The Performance of My Life

by
Steve Kriekhaus

I'd been dancing, choreographing, and performing in Philadelphia as a home base since around 1980, and had enjoyed the benefit of some not just good but great support there and around the country from the early 80s through the mid 90s. But after nearly two decades of single-mindedly pursuing Dance as an art form, for compelling personal and professional reasons I made the decision in early 1997 to wind operations down by the end of the year. For the particular kind of body-friendly (for the most part) dance I was dealing in, it may have seemed a bit premature to be calling it quits just past forty years of age. But little did I or anyone else realize at the time that this was all just fortune's way of telling me to *bide my time*, and begin laying both the fundamental and the nuanced ground work for what would become, in due time, *the performance of my life*.

And how did I *know* this was *the performance of my life*? I simply asked myself the question: which performance would I not trade for any other I'd ever done? Which had engaged and moved me at my core like no other? The answer would be self-apparent over the days that performance came to its conclusion.

So back in 1997 the strategy of *biding my time* was helped along considerably by my mother back in Missouri, living just outside St. Louis where I was born and raised. She had just spent the better part of a decade in the 1990s tending to my father during his long slow decline from Alzheimer disease, and two months after his death in the spring of 1997 she reaped the heart-breaking misfortune of suffering a major ischemic stroke herself. The plain fact was she'd nearly killed herself taking care of him those last years.

I was staying on at the family home after dad's death, sleeping in my old room, and remember being woken abruptly early that morning by what sounded like a foot striking the floor in a loud and alarming manner, just once. I somehow knew instantly from that sound that something was gravely wrong with mom. I jumped up and hurried into her room where she was sitting askew, barely sitting up, on the side of her bed with feet on the floor. I can't remember if it was her body position or her garbled speech that first clued me in that she probably had suffered a stroke.

I beseeched her that we should get to the ER immediately but she said she needed to go to the bathroom first. I helped her to the toilet with difficulty, and, completely in character she insisted I give her some privacy. I watched her in the mirror from behind the door as she literally single-handedly managed to take care of her business. When she finished I picked her up to carry her out to the car and remember thinking "My God she weighs a ton!" While she was fairly petit, stroke-weight is essentially dead-weight, I was only about 134 pounds, and this was the first time in my life I'd had to do this for ma. It would not be the last.

At the ER the CT scan verified that she had indeed suffered a major ischemic stroke. And thus began a cascade of steps which would bring me permanently back to St. Louis from Philadelphia, and take me seemingly further and further away from any involvement in the world of dance and performance.

Of *course* I would be moving back from Philadelphia. Move back and spearhead the formidable physical and cognitive rehabilitation she was staring at, a year, probably more like two. It had occurred to me very early on that “She’s seventy years old. Just had a major stroke. How much longer could I *have* with her?” The answer to that question turned out to be twenty four years, about twenty three of which would be spent *biding my time*.

She was determined and worked hard rehabbing. I was determined and prodded and encouraged her even more, and after two years she had once again regained most of her life back. I stayed on at the house because continuing to help her day-to-day was for me a no-brainer: the old house needed a lot of maintenance and remediation which on her own would have been an impossible post-stroke challenge, and, I had no wife or kids to attend to and she and I had always had a close and relatively easy (for two determined, stubborn, family members) relationship.

Our closeness had been improbably brokered decades earlier from trudging and slugging through our own personal religious war back in the 1970s. She a devout Catholic, and I an emerging atheist amidst my classmates at St. Joseph’s Catholic Elementary School, fought many a knock-down drag-out in those days. The remarkable thing was, we both gradually came to realize amidst our scuffles, outraged sensibilities, and bruised egos, that however so much we disagreed and fought with each other over theology, we always knew at the end of the day that our love for each other was going to survive and that we would manage. She once confided to me sometime later that, even though I didn’t believe in Him, she knew God could not possibly miss seeing that I was a good person.

What also helped was I’ve always had the capacity to make my mother laugh. Granted, I used it sparingly because I never wanted to wear it out. I think I applied the same strategy to audiences throughout my career. With performance work though I was never interested in just getting a laugh. The laughs would always come in service of some larger or keener absurdity or disparity I’d happened across, and it was always *that* which tugged at my mind and drove the work, not the happenstance of the humor. But with mom the motivation had always been *purely* to get her to laugh, although if I could be absurd at the same time, which was usually the case, well so much the better.

So the very early winds of change surrounding my dance career had already begun during the mid-nineties just a couple of years before my mother’s stroke. Around that time, to hedge my bet I’d begun transferring some of my thirst for movement improvisation, athleticism, and performance to technical rock climbing, which proved incredibly fulfilling in all those areas but also impossibly difficult. After a couple of years of struggle, and one pretty serious climbing accident with a dancer/climber compadre of mine, I traded the climbing in for whitewater kayaking, which proved as challenging, not quite so strenuous, and whose not-stop fluidity was just a pleasure for a dancer to behold. What invigorating years on the rapids with my paddling buddies those were! Nothing describes whitewater kayaking better than “dancing down a river”. And it turned out that the actual model name of my first kayak was simply *Dancer*.

But alas, after I moved back to Missouri in 1997 following my mother’s stroke, the solo road trips from there to West Virginia whitewater were a lot more grueling than those I’d embarked on from Philadelphia. In just a few years I simply wore out on Interstate 70, and I stopped making the trips. And because there is very little gradient on most Missouri rivers, I essentially stopped running whitewater at that time. Of course ma was secretly glad when my kayaking road trips ended because she was finally relieved of her double-duty worrying over both the safety of my long solitary drive and

my possible drowning on the river. To this day my gear remains stowed but ready in the furthest back eddies of our basement.

Still needing a creative charge though, *biding time* for me after kayaking largely took the form of photography – an interest I'd inherited from my father who'd had a keen eye, and a small black and white printing set-up in our basement from since before I was born. I eventually got my hands on his old 35mm Olympus rangefinder, took photo classes early on in my long-winded college career, and later ended up integrating slide photography with much enthusiasm into various performance works I did over the years.

So instead of inching up rock faces, or dancing down rivers, with a camera I began improvising my way through river bottoms and inner city post-industrial landscapes, happily and frequently even ecstatically recording everything from crickets and fungi, to dilapidated buildings and crushed bales of scrap metal, to getting thrown out of the Botanical Gardens because I seemed to be focusing too much on photographing the people gazing at the orchids, rather than the orchids themselves. Go figure.

And I *tried*. I really did try to photograph mom. But boy was I ever lousy at it. She hated to be photographed and I just didn't have the capacity to charm her even a little bit in those days. Nor did I have the cunning to shoot her unbeknownst. What I did manage to regularly capture was a cold put-that-damn-thing-away look which leapt onto my negative or sensor almost every time I snapped the shutter in her direction. It would be years before I found ways of capturing her image and doing her justice.

While this was happening inside our home, outside we were being surrounded by the sprawling noisy intruding suburbs. Feeling increasingly boxed in and put upon by neighbors who didn't seem to understand the old tried and true concept of *property lines*, mom accepted a generous offer from a developer, and only half-reluctantly sold the old Kriekhaus homestead around 2006.

While I completely supported her decision to sell the family plot, it was distressing to contemplate the impending destruction of the home my father had designed and early parts of which he and my mother had physically helped build. Once we'd cleared it of over fifty years of our accumulated stuff, I solemnly photographed every nook and cranny of the house, realizing in the process how starkly beautiful and effective my dad's architecture had turned out to be. Even those damn “modern” six-to-the-wall jalousie windows which mom had always complained were such a pain in the neck to keep clean.

Mom and I landed on our feet in a nice atrium ranch house set on the edge of nearby Castlewood State Park, but not for long. We were only in the house a few months when tragedy struck. We had invited over our small family for Christmas Day, including my sisters Julie and Tina, Tina's husband Daniel and their girl Katie who'd just turned twenty late that summer. Katie left our house early to attend her boyfriend's family's celebration and was heading west on Interstate 44 when she was tragically struck head-on by a drunk driving the wrong way. She was killed instantly.

Time then stopped for our small family.

But what continued was the love for my young niece which just kept flowing from family and friends over my poor sister and her husband who had set up their tent deep in the wilderness of grief. By the time they were able to eventually work their way back to the light of day, we looked up and ma had somehow reached the ripe old age of 87.

At 87 mom entered a period which I call *extra time*, a term taken from soccer meaning the time added on at the end of the game that action had been stopped, usually for reasons of injury. But in mom's case, ironically, the *extra time* turned out to also be the period when most of the injuries actually happened, along with the time needed to heal from them.

The first major fall happened at the Sears in Chesterfield Mall where she'd driven herself to shop one day. She lost her balance at the bottom of their escalator before stepping off, went down, became mildly entangled with the jaws of the steps, and apparently blood was everywhere! The subsequent trip to the ER incredibly revealed no major damage, but the loss of blood apparently accelerated a nascent case of anemia we only figured out months later, and remained a serious issue for some time.

Probably the most spectacular and death defying fall happened while I again was at work. She was at home going up the atrium steps carrying a potted plant, when halfway up the phone rang. She stopped, put the plant down on a step, and pivoted with the intention of heading to the phone, but promptly lost her balance, tumbling down backwards all the way to the basement floor. Apparently on the way down she had slung her one arm over the railing, which must have slowed her decent, and actually swung her to the side as she landed, averting what easily could have ended her life then and there. This time the ER examination revealed a fractured pelvis, which meant a stay in a rehab unit for several weeks. It turns out the phone call she'd stopped to try to answer on those stairs had been *me* calling from work to tell her I was on my way home.

Not the last, but the one which turned out to be the most serious of them all happened after a series of lesser falls caused by unexplained dizziness. That night after getting in bed, she'd gotten back up to go to the potty one last time. She was sitting there minding her business when a wave of true vertigo struck and she whirled off the toilet slamming her head down onto the hard tile floor. I heard the horrific sound from another part of the house, and by the time I arrived, though she was conscious, her head was sitting in a small pool of blood. The CT scan at the ER this time revealed a possible brain-bleed, so she wasn't going anywhere for awhile. They monitored her for a few days in the ICU, were satisfied any bleeding had stopped and that she was stable, and promptly sent her off to a rehab facility.

After only a day or two at rehab, she secretly began re-bleeding, it went undetected, she became unresponsive, and by the time we got her back to the ER her blood-pressure was upwards of 200/100 and she was in dire straits. The attending nurse had in short order given up on her. She had overheard me calling my eldest sister imploring her to come to the hospital as soon as possible, and remarkably, callously said to me, "It's *amazing* how they can hang on until the family gathers!" I was too focused on mom to say anything to her, or just simply slug her. The ER doctor pulled me into a room with a monitor to show me the scan of her brain which had just been taken; he indicated the midline which had distorted and been pushed to one side by the force of the blood, turned to me, and simply shook his head. It was at this point that it started to dawn on me that I could seriously be about to lose her.

And then the on-call brain surgeon Dr. Paul Matz walked in. Earnest and cool as a cucumber, he explained what the CT scan had revealed and it's implications. He looked at her chart, asked me a few questions about her, then described the craniotomy he had in mind, and finished with "I am cautiously optimistic". A jolt of adrenaline rushed through me. *This was our shot to save her!*

I immediately gave Dr. Matz a thumbs up, and within a couple of hours he had assembled his team. They drilled two holes, relieved the pressure, and by midnight we were allowed to see her. She was intubated, but as I walked up to her, her eyes were open – she was awake and aware. As I spoke I could see she understood me, a tear formed in her eye.... and I knew then she was back with us, and that she was going to be ok. Within weeks she was not exactly as-good-as-new, but at least ready to come home and begin working herself back to a relatively normal life once again.

By then I had come to fully understand that every time she had a big fall, she would recover and bounce back with amazing resilience, but never quite to the same level as before. The brain bleed had wrecked even more havoc, left her with some cognitive deficits, and had taken her speech recognition down a notch in her left ear. The falls were taking their toll. And so was the vascular dementia which had begun to really settle in. She would have ahead of her *five more years* of various falls and recoveries including a couple of pelvic fractures. She would also move into and thankfully out of a couple years of suffering mild and not so mild delusions. While officially I had still been *biding my time*, unofficially it was crystal clear that actually now *time was of the essence*.

I'm pretty sure it was a Saturday afternoon when it finally began. We were still more than a year away from her passing. She was still fairly mobile at that point, but because of the increased effort needed to navigate, she was gradually spending more and more time just resting or dozing on the couch. And so it was that day.

I was buzzing around back and forth doing things as usual, working on the car or mowing the lawn, or cleaning or fixing something. She had been sitting on the couch for some time – napping or watching TV - but I specifically remember at that point she was reading the newspaper, probably checking out the grocery store ads. I was zipping through the living room for the umpteenth time, when out of the blue I had this *impulse*: I abruptly veer over to where she is sitting on the couch with the newspaper raised, and instantly stop right next to her. I bend over her knees, hunch down, lower my hand to just above her knee, and with an outlandishly exaggerated vigor but the lightest possible touch, I pat it in a tight staccato rhythm: “pat pat pat pat pat”- as though while she is sitting on the sidelines waiting to get back in the game, I'm the deranged coach coming by with the maniacal encouragement. And then just as abruptly, I straighten up, not even looking at her - I am not looking at her through *any* of this, I don't *say* a word - and buzz off in the same direction I'd been heading before.

The die had been cast.

From that day forward, every so often as I was walking through the house, at the drop of a dime I'd veer off toward her and into this tightly wound vignette. She'd be sitting there reading the paper. I'd be walking through on my way to the kitchen, and suddenly on the other side of the paper she'd feel an almost catlike "pat pat pat pat pat" on her knee. The hand was slightly cupped and fingers together like a swimmer's hand. The movement like a jack-hammer but the touch as light as humanly possible. Three pats were too few. Six were too many. It had to be four or five. I'd straighten up in the blink of an eye, wouldn't say a word but sometimes take a quick look to check in with her, and move on. I'm sure she must have looked up at me sometimes, but I'd already be on my way downstairs or to the kitchen or garage. I knew I needed to let just enough time go by in between these episodes so as not to annoy her, but perform them frequently enough to let her know I was always thinking of her, always encouraging her, and *always* loving her. Expressed in a way only her crazy son could possibly have devised.

As that year passed my mother's condition slowly worsened, as we all knew it would. I had gradually come to perform my little ritual more often by then, sometimes two or even three times a week. As the winter passed she was having a harder and harder time understanding what you were saying to her, and on the other hand she was also becoming more tongue tied, and it became frequently impossible to understand what she was trying to say to us. It was unbearable at times to witness her frustrated efforts to give voice to the thoughts she still had nestled somewhere in her mind, but could not enunciate. Conversation had all but dried up. She had tried and tried, but was beginning to remain silent for long periods of time.

Things were looking bleaker and bleaker, and I was as usual sitting next to her, keeping her company watching TV that day. No doubt I'd been sitting there for quite a long while, and no doubt there had been almost nothing said between us. But as time went on and I watched the television, I noticed something move in the corner of my eye. As I shifted my vision over I noticed her arm slowly lifting up. And as I turned my head the arm took a while to lift, but then it changed direction and was swinging over toward me. Her gnarled fist, unable to open because of the arthritis, began slowly descending, and, just as I was putting this all together, I felt a gentle "pat pat pat" on my knee. I was already smiling broadly as I looked over at her, the corners of her mouth barely raised, and we shared the equivalent of a snort and chuckle together over this. I was beside myself.

The die had been re-cast.

And from then on, every once in awhile, as I would be sitting next to her on the couch for long periods of time, helping her with her drink or a snack or watching the TV, just when I least expected it, her measly arm would rise up, slowly swing over, and the gnarly knuckles would come down and gently pat my knee a few times, "pat pat pat." Three pats had been too few for me, but it turned out it was the perfect number for mom.

As her condition further deteriorated in the last few months of her life, to my great sorrow the "pats" disappeared. She no longer had the strength or focus left for it. Just keeping herself sitting up was a challenge most of the time. And to tell you the truth, at that point there were so many acute things going on, and I was so worried about her, that I probably didn't even notice this omission.

But what the "pats" had taught me, was to take advantage of any and every opportunity to gently put my hands on her, to make contact, and reassure her. So every time I would be sitting with her on the couch and get up, as I circled around and passed behind her I would always reach down and put my hand on her shoulder for just a moment. Anytime I was in her proximity I would try somehow to find a way to put my hand on her. This was as much for my reassurance as hers.

You may have figured out by now that my mom was not a big hugger-kisser type. But there was one exception to this in the run up to her final days. One afternoon in early spring I was finishing the precisely choreographed and difficult transfer of my mother from her wheelchair into her bed for an afternoon nap. The maneuver finishes with my two hands guiding her momentum into a soft roll onto her left side. That afternoon, as the roll ended, I withdrew my hands and stepped back to survey her position. She, not even attempting to speak, weakly raised her right arm up off the mattress in the unmistakable international gesture for beaconing a hug. I leaned over and warmly obliged her, a little surprised and a bit choked up. For the next month or so, when I put her to bed, the arm would frequently lift up and a hug would ensue. Sadly, as she continued her steepening curve downward, soon when she rolled over on her side she would simply close her eyes exhausted, and already be halfway to sleep. Such is life.

We had moved through Spring and we were approaching summer and things weren't looking good. Handling her had grown even tougher. She had gotten to the point, when standing, of having real trouble figuring out how to use her legs. While she had lost most of her strength in every other part of her body, those old hands were still remarkably powerful.

The problem was she was now getting “frozen” in an unbalanced position between sitting and standing when she'd finished her business on the commode. I would be ready to lift her and get her up onto her center of gravity, but she refused to let go of the hand rails, and I would sometimes have to pry her hand finger by finger off while still somehow supporting her in order to clean her up and transition her to a safe position. When I would start prying those fingers, she, no longer having the capacity to express her protest and bewilderment with normal speech, would bleat out the only words she could still summon that might get her message across: “Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with Thee, blessed art Thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of Thy womb Jesus...”. She would continue the recitation until I'd finally gotten her cleaned, and up, and to where she needed to be.

Frankly, in the middle of this, sometimes for just a fraction of a second I stood outside of it and smiled a little bit at the absurdity of *this* impossible dance/wrestling match. Of course one glance at mom's heartbreaking dismay would bring me right back to the sorrow of it all.

Because of this increasing difficulty transitioning ma, I was on the verge of calling in professional help to assist my sisters who had been coming in days to spell me. That's when, completely out of the blue, miraculously, she experienced a small but significant up-tick in cognitive functioning. To our amazement, not infrequently during that entire week my mother would come out with five or six word sentences, perfectly formed and understandable, and completely connected to what was going on in the moment – a use of language and clarity of thought we'd not seen for months and months. What an incredible gift this was for us. The hospice nurse later informed me that these miraculous periods of raised functioning are actually not infrequent among their patients just before end-of-life.

So one afternoon that week, knowing we were on a bit of a roll, I offered to take her out back on the deck. Heartbreakingly she'd not shown any interest in going out there since early Spring. But this time she nodded yes, and I wheeled her out. We were only there for five or ten minutes, and were sitting there in silence when she said to me: “*The breeze feels so good.*” Oh my God. I hadn't heard her express a simple pleasure like that in memory. And as if that weren't good enough, as I'm futzing with my phone to commemorate this moment with a selfie, she *made a joke*: she lifted her bandaged arm up and made to push me out of the frame, as though to have the shot all to herself! Oh. My. God.

I go back now and look at this image, and marvel at the playfulness and awareness she mustered for it, but I also can not help noticing the off-focus of her eyes and lack of facial expression, and realize even more-so how amazing her feat was given the paralysis spreading through her body and mind. I also now realize that I didn't fully comprehend at that moment, just how near to death she was.

While we'd had a bump up cognitively that week, she continued going down physically and was bottoming out. Another afternoon that week I found myself silently sitting next to her on the couch watching TV for a long long while, nothing said, me wondering and anxious about what would happen next with her. But at that point, just being with her while she was still alive was good enough for me, and I'm sure I was thinking along these lines when, against all the odds, when I again least expected it, *I notice her little arm rustling up, and I watch as it slowly arcs over to me, and the old*

hand lowers and gently nestles on my knee. Just once. She knew that I knew what she meant by this. I was overwhelmed.

And so our big-little dance, this repeated exchange of reassuring gesture which we'd shared between each other over the course of the final year and last days of her life, and which in essence contained and acknowledged *everything else* held between us, was coming to its final conclusion. We'd surprised, comforted, and encouraged each other for more than a year, but now time was finally expiring. Just two days later on that Friday afternoon mom would crash with respiratory distress.

When our Hospice nurse arrived at our home and examined her, she said she probably had twenty four to forty eight hours left to live. She administered morphine and ma soon went to sleep. Her blood oxygen was way down to 70 and the nurse said that number was not going to come up and that we shouldn't expect her to rally. So I thought *this is finally it*. She probably wouldn't wake again, and there would be nothing more shared between us.

That long long night I became familiar with what the death rattle really means. Every exhale she made was a moan, which if I hadn't known was quite benign, would have been unbearable. Just before I finally got to sleep at 4am I checked her blood oxygen and it had risen to 85! So much for the numbers not rising. I checked it again at 7am and it was still in the 80s. She had made it to morning, and her numbers were better, but she just wasn't waking up. It looked like she wouldn't be seeing us again.

I was on the phone that morning with a dear friend from back East, who knew and was very fond of my mother; my friend who happens to be Jewish knew mom was a devout Catholic, and asked me, "What about a priest?" Jesus Mary and Joseph! I'd forgotten Last Rites for my own dying mother! I anxiously called Hospice and they arranged a visit by a young priest around 11am. Sadly, as the priest performed the solemn ritual, mom was completely oblivious.

But I was holding her hand only hours later when, again defying all expectation, she opened her dark brown eyes and I could tell she had come back to us. I said "I love you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry". Speaking loudly and mouthing the words so she might better understand, I told her of the priest we'd had in that morning to administer Last Rites while she was unresponsive. The tear that dropped from her eye convinced me that she had understood what I had just told her, and if it had been unclear to her that she was probably about to die, this had made it all crystal. Although she couldn't speak, for the next ten minutes every exhale, each quite audible, was filled with sorrow.

She remained conscious and aware for the rest of the afternoon, and my two sisters and I each had our time with her, to say our goodbyes and spend time holding her hand and feeling her squeeze. Amazingly she remained conscious from afternoon through the evening, but then again began suffering some respiratory distress. The hospice nurse arrived back around 10pm and administered more morphine and told us that mom had "minutes.... to hours".

Her breathing eased, she seemed to stabilize, and she also remained conscious. She was once again puttering along, and while I wasn't kidding myself – I fully realized she wasn't going to make it out of the weekend - I did become convinced she was going to make it through the night ok (as she had so many times before) and that we'd at least have the one more morning before she left us. I became *so* sure of this in my own mind that I was able to convince my sisters to leave, and that they plan on

coming back sometime in the morning. Finally they did leave, but the hospice nurse remained (Only later did I realize that she was equally sure that mom was going to pass any minute.) However 11 o'clock came and ma was still puttering along, so finally, reluctantly, the nurse departed, leaving me alone with my mother.

She was in bed on her left side as always, and I lay down beside her on my right, mirroring her. Her eyes were open and alert. I placed my right hand lightly on her head and my left hand gently over her right forearm. She was breathing not restfully but *decently* - and I lay there with her for a little while, not knowing what to think, and trying to just be present with her. It was late though and I was exhausted. I figured I would sleep there beside her for the rest of the night, but lights were on in the house and people had left drinks... so I needed to get up and quickly take care of that.

I slid out of bed, but when my feet hit the carpet I pivoted around so mom could see me, and I made sure I had eye contact as I bent down at the knees, hunkering down like a tennis player waiting to receive service, and for emphasis I shook my index finger which I'd thrust up in front of my face, mimicking the rhythm of the words I was mouthing, as I said "I'll be right back, I'll be back in a minute". Hopefully reassuring her.

I whirled back around and hurried out to the kitchen, put a few things away, and rushed back into her bedroom. I slipped back into bed beside her, she was still awake and still breathing steadily. I again placed my right hand lightly on her head and left hand around her forearm, and just lay there again awhile with her, laying and wondering. And again after a bit I once more slipped out of the bed, whirled around, made eye contact, hunkered down, gestured and told her I'd be right back. I'd be back in a minute.

I checked the doors and turned out the rest of the lights and headed back into the bedroom, although this time there was some reason I needed to go into her bathroom. As I passed the foot of the bed I looked over and it appeared that she had finally fallen asleep. Her eyes were now closed, her mouth was a bit open and askew, which was normal, and I turned to continue into the bathroom when a short, caustic, *crackle* or *pop* sound came from, *must* have come from, her throat! I had no idea what I'd just heard, but immediately turned and went over to the bed. I leaned over from the other side to get closer, and as I did I heard a faint sound like the end of a small burp or gurgle come from her mouth. As this finished, my brain finally registered what my eyes had already been seeing: she was not moving at all, *she was no longer breathing*.

I rushed around to the other side of the bed and slipped my left hand under her head which was still noticeably warm and even moist, while I gently rested my right over her small emaciated hip bone. I barely raised her head and heard an air sound, which I thought at first might be a gasp. But then I realized it wasn't. It wasn't at all. Nothing in my life had ever been as clear as the certainty I felt in my own two hands at that moment, that there was absolutely no life left in my poor mother's worn out body. Ma was finally gone. She *was* no more.

The reader has no doubt long ago realized that whenever I said *biding my time* I was both developing a literary conceit and meaning something completely the opposite of what I was saying. That *biding my time* ended up really being about fully inhabiting the life I found myself sharing with my mother. And

that *the performance of my life*, a wonderful interlude with my mom over the course of the last year of her life, also ended up being about the devotion we shared for each other over the entirety of those last two decades, up to the very end.

Life is given. Life is lived. Life vanishes. But this had surely been one of the greatest gifts I'd ever received. I was honored to have served my mother in her later life, as she had once served my father, and to have served my own soul-craft well nigh those many years of taking care. Many many parts of our lives together over the course of more than two early decades and two final ones I will always carry with me. And the sense of my mother's incredible fortitude during the final years and days of her life, the many small triumphs which were anything but small, and the feeling of her rising up at moments, transcending her struggles and finding humanity and even humor amidst her gathering worst circumstances, that will be a touchstone with me for the rest of my days. But the dance that we shared over the final year of her life, and the image of her arm slowly rising up and her old hand gently lowering down on my knee that one last time, *that* will remain indelible in my heart forevermore.

In Memoriam
Rosaria Bernadine Kriekhaus
October 7, 1926 – June 27, 2021

Special thanks to my sisters Julie Kriekhaus and Tina Houlihan, who both helped me greatly with mom's care those last eight months, and helped me keep her in our home until the end. And very special thanks to Jan Klemmer Homsher, my dearest brother/sister-in-arms.

Steve Kriekhaus
St. Louis,
February 2022