

# NOT OF REASON

A RECIPE FOR  
OUTRUNNING SADNESS

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CAITLIN PRESS

*For my sister, Judy McLaughlin, and my mother,  
Erin (Edna Mae) Moir*

*For their ethics and smarts, laughter and hospitality  
(in its true meaning), sheer guts and grace*

# CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: 2012	8
PIN CURLS RULE: 2010	13
AN AGNOSTIC THANK YOU	55
HEY JUDE: 2011	93
ROSA CANINA: 2012	125
STELLA MATUTINA: 2013	147
CONSOLOTRIX AFFLICTORUM: 2014	171
THERE'S SOMETHING IN A NAME: 2015	192
EASTER: 2016	202
EPILOGUE: 2017	203
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	205
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	207

# PROLOGUE: 2012

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 8

I take Brier, my golden retriever, for a walk on the rail line that winds through the forest by the river. It's another sunny day of Easter, the second after so many days of gloom. I remove my heavy sweatshirt and sit on a bench as Brier heads to the water. It's her first spring, and every part of the world is her mystery to explore. I close my eyes to feel the sun; no one comes by and my breathing slows.

It's the first Easter since my sister died and I crave silence. I had tried for the company of voices, but the giggling host on the radio annoyed me. I tried a violin concerto, but it distracted me. Gospel choir, perfect for a Sunday, this particular Sunday, the Montreal Jubilation Choir, but it was too much. I want the sound of Brier gnawing her bone, the snap of the woodstove as the metal heats, the bark of a distant dog. I want the heat of spring sun melting the cold of the blue sky two days past the full moon. I want nothing productive, just this time alone to watch the daffodils push through sodden and icy leaf mulch, just this time to watch a young dog play at the river's edge.

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In our rural valley in British Columbia, we are perhaps more “hands on” in the rituals of death than in other places. Yesterday, for example, we stood in our graveyard in the mountains burying the ashes and saying farewell to a young man who grew up here in the Slokan Valley.

In our community hall, his parents and friends set up for his memorial as I finished cleaning after the previous night’s dance. On the piano, they placed his photos and the music he had written. They hauled in casseroles and salads and cakes covered in tin foil and labelled with people’s names. They set the tables with long green cloths; they spread flowered cloths angled just so across the middle. Small vases of daffodils, large vases of dried grasses and cedar boughs, and daffodils again. I reminded them how to turn on the big gas stove, how to use the dishwasher, then left them to their tasks.

We deepen and deepen, each time we celebrate a birth, or, after a death dig the spade into the frozen ground at our cemetery, where this young man’s mother and father stand quietly in overcoats and boots; we know each other’s stories, or we take this time to learn more, to simply show up to help with the lifting and moving on.

A large bell made by a local metal worker hangs low. After the Buddhist ceremony, each mourner kneels on the cedar boughs that cover the ashes. We strike the bell and remain

kneeling as the reverberation sings, until the forest is quiet, as if his spirit has lifted.

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The walk with Brier by the river is the perfect silence I've been seeking. There is only the river still quiet before runoff, the silence of sun in blue sky, the golden of old grasses, the dog looking up at me as she exalts in the water below.

It goes like this, the saying: in the natural order, parents should die before their children. But that fairy tale of natural order is only a candle held to the dark. When, really, has it ever been true? Not yesterday at our cemetery. Not in the great epidemics, not in the huge sweep of poverty or the gutting of war, not even in middle-class families with all the privileges of good health care. It is not the natural order in my family. Not the natural order in many families I know. I could recite a dozen instances of children dying before parents, three in my immediate family, four if we include my extended family, six if we go back another generation. Many of my friends have lost their children: Amanda, Penny and Larry's baby; Lois and Craig's son, Jesse; Dale and Tara's son, Zack; crib deaths, cancer, a child who simply didn't wake up. My partner Dan's daughter, Teri, and now this young man, Wilson Padmos, whose ashes lie beneath the bell. A few days ago, my friend Mitzi told me the third of her four adult sons had just died. They died in the order in which they were born. What natural order is that? I go down the backroads

and lanes of memory, up the rows of gravestones of children young and old, who died before their parents.

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As I sit in the sun on a bench by the Slocan River, next to a small bed of yellow crocuses, Brier paws for minnows. I've seen all our family dogs do this. They are curious and naive and brave all at once. Brier dunks her head and shakes it in surprise, then tackles the river harder, plunges, rear end in the air.

"Brier, what are you doing?" I call in alarm. She is too young and can't swim, let alone stay underwater so long. She ignores me; her head's far under and the water flies and her tail wags as she digs at the riverbed.

Dragging up a trapped and bedraggled branch, she raises her eyes to mine, triumphant.

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The unnatural order has not spared my family: my sister Donna had a baby who after heart surgery died at the age of one month. My sister Judy's son William was killed at age twenty-three in a plane crash. Judy's stepson John died of a brain tumour at forty-one. And in the continuation of this unnatural order, after Judy and my elderly mother each had heart surgery during the same week, my mother was alive a year later and my sister, at age sixty-six, was dead.

Judy should have donned Mum's mantle and became the matriarch. But that's not what happened. Until my mother's

death at age ninety-eight, the natural order, as usual, was thrown into chaos.

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My mother and Judy were the voices, the truths, deep inside me. They were the storytellers, the cheerleaders, the ones who believed in me: my mother, whose heart could stop at any moment, and finally did, and my sister Judy, who in the year before her death wasn't telling us the extent of her troubles. For them I would do anything. The job I set myself after their deaths isn't just to tell their stories, but to recompose the harmony of our days. I have written this as my sister died, as my mother lived six more years, and when she, too, died. This story is my attempt at restoration.

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A bald eagle drifts and turns, watching us, catching the currents of the mountain air, the river, and the heat of the spring sun. Brier rolls in long, golden grasses below the cottonwood, and her coat is sweet with the scent of their catkins.