

December 1992

My mother passed away this year. The last couple of months have been very difficult but I want to remember them. So, I am writing this to try and capture the last few months of Mom's life. I have tried to remember this as accurately as I can.

Tim Mikkelsen

Virginia, Mandy, Ben and I went back to Iowa in the middle of August (after my summer session, but before my class residency). We drove straight through to Des Moines so that Mandy could catch a plane to visit her friend Courtney in Minneapolis. So we didn't all stop by to see Mom.

I left Virginia in Des Moines with her mom (Lee) and sister (Vicki). Ben and I drove back to Missouri Valley to see Mom. On our way to Mo. Valley, we drove by Harlan and visited Dad's grave. We got in to Mo. Valley Thursday afternoon. Mom looked thin and pale, but she had for a while - especially after her bout with colon cancer 2 years before.

I had been back to help during the colon cancer in 1990. I believe that smoking was a big cause of the cancer. She did very well with the operation. The only problem then had been her lung capacity. I had worked very hard to get her to stop smoking then, but she didn't. In retrospect, she was thoroughly hooked on smoking - physically and mentally.

I drove Mom around town to pay some of her bills and do some banking. She had been slowing down a lot during the last 6 months. So, it helped being there to get her out and about for the errands. We went out that evening for pizza at Pizza Hut - Mom, Ben and I.

The next morning, we drove down early (like at 8:30 AM) to Omaha with Mary Briggs (Mom's friend) to get in to the Lied Jungle at the Henry Dorley zoo. This was an enclosed rain forest. Ben and I really liked this. It was very well done.

It was very strange going to the zoo because Mom couldn't walk around very well (short of breath). So, I got her a wheel chair and I pushed her through the exhibit. Mary Briggs was about 2 years older and was full of energy and pep. It was an odd juxtaposition seeing the two of them. Mom had seemed mostly okay, but she just couldn't walk.

The visit was pretty short, I think Ben and I left that evening to come back to Des Moines. But we had a good time. When Ben and I got back to Des Moines, I mentioned that this was a good way to do the visits with my Mom. I had planned to do more of them this way. It would work out better with Virginia and one of the kids in Des Moines and me and the other in Mo. Valley for various short visits. This way Mom could get me and one of the kids out to the relatives a lot easier. (Visiting relatives was important to Mom.)

I knew, at some level, that things were not going very well for Mom's health. Virginia and I talked about this time about my Mom's health. I said that I knew that she wouldn't be around for much longer. I felt that over the next few years, something would get her. I suspected it would be a cold or a fall that would put her in the hospital. Then her bad lung capacity (from emphysema from smoking) would kill her. I didn't realize that it would be so soon.

We got back from the Iowa trip in August. In late August, I went on a trip to Bristol, England. I got back and was in my normal work and school routines. I got a call from Mildred Dewaele around September 8th. She said my mom wasn't feeling very good and had gone in the hospital. This was Wednesday that she had gone into the hospital. Earlier in the day, Mom kept her appointments and actually did a permanent wave on a lady. Talking with the lady, Mom had to lean against her because she was so weak. Mom didn't want anybody to call Tom or I yet. I kept in touch with Mildred and was getting ready to go back, if necessary. I didn't know what was going on yet.

I flew out that Saturday morning (and missed Ben's soccer game). I flew into Omaha and Mary Briggs picked me up at the airport in her older red sedan (which always seemed at the edge of shaking itself apart). I got up to the hospital in Mo. Valley. She was, at that point, in the intensive care room. Mom did not look good. She was on an oxygen mask and several IV tubes. I talked to her some. In general, I did not stay in the room because she kept trying to get up or talk or whatever. She couldn't just lie there with somebody in the room.

She had gotten a stomach ulcer. This is apparently common with smokers with emphysema. The lack of lung capacity reduces the amount of oxygen. This builds up the amount of CO₂ (carbon dioxide) in the body. This makes the person acidic which sets up for stomach ulcers. Mom had had some blood in her stool and had been taking medication, but it apparently hadn't helped much. During the week of September 8th, apparently the ulcer had really opened up. The bleeding had dumped a lot of blood into her abdomen. Not only did she have the bleeding problem, the loss of blood made her oxygen capacity even worse. They gave her ulcer medication, fluids and 5 units of blood. This helped some.

Sunday she got worse. She wasn't coherent. This was an aspect of the CO₂ build-up. I talked to Tom and he had made arrangements to fly in, but wouldn't get into Omaha until 9 or 10 o'clock at night.

Mom got really bad. She was incoherent. She was going to die that evening unless some drastic measures were taken. I had to decide whether or not to intubate her - put her on a respirator. This involved putting the oxygen tube down into her lungs and forcing the air in and out - since she was not doing an adequate job of this on her own.

Mom had a living will. Unfortunately, it was not very explicit. It only specified, basically, that she did not want to be kept alive by artificial means. She had been on the

respirator on Friday night and had come off of it. I wished Tom could have been there to help with the decision. (I was upset at him for not being there.) I talked a little bit with Mom's friend Mildred who had been up at the hospital a lot. I talked with the doctor to try to find out about the chances. Dr. Cohen felt that she had a good chance of making it off the respirator. (I think he said a 60% chance.) If I didn't agree to the procedure, she would die within an hour. (I felt huge amounts of pressure in all directions.)

Obviously, I wanted my mother to live and couldn't just let her die. But, I didn't want her to go on the respirator and then have to stay on it. I called my sister-in-law, Mary Lee, about this. She was a nurse and had a copy of the living will. Her judgement was to let Mom go.

It seem to take hours trying to decide my mother's fate, but it was about an hour or so. I finally decided to put her on the respirator. This is one the hardest decisions I have ever had to make. (I want to set things up so that Virginia and my children do not have to make this sort of decision.) I felt Mom deserved the chance. In the discussions, the doctor said that if she chose when she was a little recovered, we could take her off the respirator later.

During all of this, I found out from one of the respiratory therapy nurses, that Nebraska did not honor living wills. This was an issue and a concern because the Mo. Valley hospital was in Iowa, but associated with a larger Nebraska hospital - Clarkson I think. If things went bad or she needed some treatment, this could impact my ability to fulfill her wishes and directions. This was also an issue because the Mo. Valley hospital had pretty limited facilities. My mother's condition put a strain on the hospital staffing. It required changing some schedules and pulling in some additional nurses - especially respiratory therapy and a nurse for the intensive care unit. (The ICU was not usually staffed around the clock.)

Tom finally came in that Sunday night. I was expecting him to give me some grief about the decision. He did not and was very supportive. In many ways the next few weeks were some of the best times in terms of my interactions with my brother.

That night, sleeping at Mom's apartment, I had a dream. In this dream I had to decide about a respirator for somebody. It wasn't for Mom, it was for Tom. I feel that this is a pretty transparent dream - in terms of what I was thinking.

During that weekend, Doctor Cohen was the only doctor on call at the hospital. I think it was Sunday night, he was in checking on my mother and there was another patient who was very restless. He called out to the nurse to give a sedative to the other patient. This was miscommunicated and both my mother and the other patient got the medication. It depressed her functions. It took until the next day or two until they figured out what was going on.

Mom's regular physician was Dr. Barnes. Dr. Cohen was involved because of his weekend duty. Cohen had a relatively thick accent. Lots of people commented on how

hard he was to understand. (I didn't think it was too bad.) Cohen was more aggressive on treatment than Barnes. I suspect that Barnes would have let Mom go that first weekend. (He also intimidated this in one of the discussions.) At times it was very hard getting them to tell me anything.

During the week that Tom and I were there, there were lots of people stopping by. Helen Macintosh had Tom and I over for lunch at her house by the hospital. It was classic Iowa food - it was very good.

During the week, Bernice came up for a visit. Bernice was my Dad's only sister. Dad and Mom never really thought much of her and felt she always got what she wanted while my Dad got the short end of the stick. She had been acting strangely over the last few years - goofy. (I found out at Mom's funeral that she was a full-fledged diagnosed Alzheimers' victim.) She got her boy friend - Lars - to drive her up. She came into the hospital and Tom and I started to talk with her. She tried to get into the ICU room and started shouting at Mom saying 'hey Mabel'. (Mom's name is Norma.) I think she was trying to be cute. I also think she had forgotten Mom's name. She kept telling people that 'my brother was married to the lady'. Tom and I both had to restrain her at the door. We finally got her out of there. Lars helped - he seemed like a nice guy. It took a long time to get her to leave the hospital. She kept repeating stuff. She also wanted a picture of Tom and I taken with her. I talked to Mom after this. She just shook her head and pointed to it (indicating that Bernice was a loon).

Ella, Mom's older sister, came up to visit. She got her son Bill to bring her up. This went okay. Ella was not taking this very well. Ella can be hell on wheels. Fortunately, Tom was the one who called and told her what was going on during this period.

Mom slowly got better. It was very slow progress. (I think the sedative was a factor in the speed of recovery. Not the only one, but a factor.) Mom got off the respirator on Thursday.

During the later part of that week, Tom, Dr. Cohen and I talked with Mom. We talked with about the respirator. We asked if she wanted to go back on the respirator if it was necessary. She said no. The doctor asked if she understood that this might mean that she would die. She understood.

I had changed flights and ended up scheduled to leave on Saturday. I didn't want to leave unless she got a bit better. She got a little better and they moved her out of ICU into a private room. Tom and I helped move her out of the ICU. I left for Fort Collins right after this. Tom left that evening, I think.

I did not like leaving. I felt even more helpless than I had when I was there. I called and talked to Mildred mostly. I got very limited information from the doctors. Virginia and I were going to a movie on Friday night. Cohen called Friday and said things looked really bad. He felt she would go that night or maybe Saturday. We waited around Saturday for

the call to fly back. She got better! I had been planning on driving back that weekend anyway, but by the time this all played out I didn't head back that weekend.

Harvey, Mom's brother, had been coming up most of the time Mom was in the hospital. I had talked to him quite a bit as well. It made me feel a lot better knowing that Mildred and Harvey were there - people who cared.

During this time, Mildred was up there a lot and actually slept up at the hospital with Mom

I talked to Mildred and things did not look great. They were going to get the fluid out of her abdomen. This was from the ulcer. It had dumped into her abdomen. During the time since the ulcer, she hadn't passed any of it and it was still in her belly. They had taken a sample and there was some blood in it.

I went back for planned removal of the fluid and got there Wednesday. I went up to see her when I got in. She looked pretty bad - very tired and labored. I talked with her some Wednesday night. I asked her how she was doing. She was very raspy but said "not good". She did keep talking about going home and sleeping in her own bed.

I got in Thursday morning and went in to talk to Mom. She was conscious, but was again tired and very labored. She kept rubbing my hand - like she was trying to reassure me that everything would be okay. She would fade in and out of coherency. There was also a large fluid build up in her left arm (called edema).

Doctor Barnes came in. He said that it didn't make sense to remove the fluid. She wasn't going to make it. The fluid would keep building up. Her lungs were not in good shape, she still had the ulcer and fluid build up and there had been problems keeping her heart and kidneys going. The doctor said she would probably be gone that day. I called Tom. I set up so Tom and Mom talked. She was shouting something out and I think she heard him, but I am not entirely sure. Harvey was up.

They took off the oxygen mask to make Mom more comfortable. She slipped quickly into sleep - a coma. A nurse tried to put her mask back on. I asked why. She wasn't very informed and we got it off again. Within a few hours her pulse had dropped to where the monitor couldn't pick it up effectively. They came in and did pulse and blood pressure by hand. I asked if this was really necessary. The nurses said that it was hospital policy.

Her breathing got slower and slower. More relaxed. Mom finally stopped breathing. She looked more peaceful and relaxed than she had for the last several months. Harvey and I hugged. I called Tom and told him that she was gone. I stayed with her for a while. I cried a bit. I tried to close Mom's mouth, because it was down. It wouldn't stay. Mildred and Mary and Ruby all came up. Mildred tried to close Mom's mouth as well. I told her that I had tried that too. She put a rolled up towel underneath it to keep it up.

We left the room and they got her cleaned up. I arranged for the funeral home to come and get Mom's body. Later that afternoon, I talked with them about preliminary arrangements. I started calling for pall bearers (Dean and Doug Dewaele, Burhl and Bill Gilpin, Ed Pitt and Lyle MacIntosh. I also talked briefly with Reverend Krumpel. Mom's personal history was a big help with the funeral home and the minister. I left the book with the minister.

I got help from Mildred Dewaele and from Marcita Brown with picking out clothes for Mom to be buried in. They picked out one of her favorite outfits - the blue suit outfit. Marcita had been Mom's friend for years and had been doing her hair. Marcita agreed to do it.

On Thursday night, I couldn't sleep very easily. I went through Mom's apartment getting things straightened up. I found the metal file box with Mom's will. In with this was a small note with a tiny waxed-paper envelope. The note said that 'if anything should happen, she wanted to be buried with her wedding ring'. The envelope had a very thin wedding ring with a small diamond on it. I am really really glad that I found this. (Being able to follow Mom's last wish.)

Tom and Mary Lee came in late that Thursday night but stayed in Council Bluffs. We got together on Friday and made final arrangements for the funeral - to be held on Saturday. We talked to the funeral home and picked out the coffin and crypt. We talked to the minister and arranged the service.

Virginia and Ben came in on Friday afternoon. I went down to pick them up. Mandy wasn't feeling good and wasn't really emotionally ready anyway. She stayed in Fort Collins. The three of us got back into town just after the viewing of the body started at the funeral home. The viewing was very nice. The people were talking about Mom and the good memories. I introduced Ben and Virginia to a lot of people. Ed McFarren and his wife were there. They were people that we used to go up to Minnesota to visit at their summer vacation home. (This was a lot of fun.) I had thought that he had been gone for years. It was nice being reminded of the good times and memories. People also talked a lot about all of the nice things that my Mom did for them. Ben wasn't sure he wanted to see Grandma Norma - after she died. He went up to the coffin and looked in. He did just fine. (When he got back, he would tell his friends about this.)

The funeral plans came together well. Some of the local people dropped off food (a good midwestern tradition). Bernice and her family (two sons and their families) came up for the funeral. She showed up at the church an hour early. I really didn't want to have to deal with her that morning. Fortunately her son (Alan) took her out for coffee so it wasn't a problem. (I feel very sorry for her family - as hard as this is, the Alzheimers disease would be a much worse way to go. I talked with Michael and Alan about this a bit. They were very helpful and kept Bernice in tow pretty well.) Art, Lee, Chris and Vicki (Virginia's family) came over for the funeral as well. This was very nice.

The funeral went well. It was held at St. Paul's Lutheran church in Missouri Valley. (The funeral home was about a half a block away from Mom's apartment. The church was about a block away.) The minister used information from Mom's book and gave a very nice service. After the service, we all went downstairs in church for a light lunch. This went well. But, my immediate reaction with all the relatives was to find Mom and ask her 'who was that' or 'what relation are they to us' and so on. But, I couldn't.

After the luncheon, we drove over to Harlan for the actual burial. I took the 'back way' on the old highway as opposed to the interstate. This brought back a lot of memories of trips to Harlan to visit Grandma Claussen (Mom's mom). The interment went okay. Ben and one of the other children (I think a Gilpin) were fascinated by the mechanism that lowered the coffin into the grave. They kept looking and fiddling with it. The funeral director gave each of us a carnation off of the coffin spray.

We got back to Mo. Valley. We went out to eat at Gurney's in town. We went back and did some cleaning up of the apartment.

We left that Sunday. Because of some flight problems, Virginia left early. I dropped her off (having left Ben with Mildred) at the airport. Later, Tom drove Ben and I to the airport. Tom actually gave me a hug and said he loved me. This was one of the few times that I've ever really seen Tom act 'brotherly'. I left for a business trip to Japan on Tuesday of that week. This was probably too soon. I had a very hard time sleeping over there (a combination of the travel and Mom's death).

Later in October, Virginia and I drove back to get everything ready for an estate sale. Art and Lee and Chris came over to help. We sorted through things. (Mildred had done a some before we got there.) This went well and fast. But, I did not like it. The apartment still felt like Mom's place and we were 'tearing it apart'. (It was like we were destroying her memories. It felt very odd.) I gave Chris and Julie a set of shelves for their house. Virginia and I took back a bunch of stuff - an antique table, miscellaneous memorabilia, a small freezer, a color TV for Ben, and other household goods. We got done sooner than we expected. We left Saturday night and drove through to the middle of Nebraska and spent the night in a motel.

Mom did an amazing job of getting everything lined up. She had set up so that we did not need a lawyer or pay any taxes or anything. It has been very clean. Mom had some insurance policies for the kids and some big ones for Tom and I. We were both amazed at the amount of money she had set aside - around \$100,000. I did not realize that she had this much. Part of this came from careful planning with her insurance man. In some of the policies, she doubled the money she put in the policy. This is very consistent with how everybody remembered Mom - she was very loving and helpful but very pragmatic.

September 1993

It has been almost a year since Mom got sick. I'm done with the classes and work for the masters degree I was pursuing when Mom died. In one way, having the school work helped me through Mom's death. It gave me something to focus on. But, similarly, focusing on school prevented me from coming to closure with Mom's death. Now I have an opportunity to think about Mom and the fact she is gone. I miss her, but I am also glad she did not have to live her last months or years in a nursing home or something similar.

Tom has finished up the estate only recently (the last month or two). One of the insurance policies did not work out - we received a refund for the policy amount - not the payoff. This was because Mom signed papers that stated she had not had been hospitalized or had cancer (I think) for some period of time. She signed the papers within a month of it being correct - but she was off by about a month. But all in all, she did good.

I have not really done much with the money from the estate. I am going to be investing as part of Mandy and Ben's college fund. Part of it went for some miscellaneous expenses (including some computer hardware). Tom did a good job on the estate aspects. However, one thing he did bothered me. In the safety deposit box there were a variety of papers and some coins and bills from the Hotel. (The coins were buffalo nickels, mercury head dimes and some others. The bills were silver certificates - while I was growing up, you could take a bill into the government and get the equivalent value in silver. This was when currency was backed up by precious metal value.) I told Tom that I wanted half of them to keep. He took them to get them appraised (I guess in case there were some single unique coins). He not only got them appraised, but he sold them. When he told me, I told him (again) that I had wanted them. I asked him to see if he could get the some of them back and he said that he would check into it. He has not made any other comment about them, so I assume they are gone.

Mom's friends and relatives seem to be doing okay. I think they sound a bit sadder when I talk to them. Although I'm sure there are other reasons, I think part of it is that Mom did a lot for all of them. She was a good friend and relative. She would write letters and call and visit and, in general, make sure everybody was doing fine. She left an empty spot in their lives that nobody else has filled.

Tim Mikkelsen

October 1993

In going through some of Mom's effects, there is a spiral notebook with a few pages about my dad. I had asked Mom about Dad and his life. So the following are the pieces that I was able to decipher from the notebook. (Mom's writing was always a little tough for me to read.) She brought it to the hospital with her and was planning to write more.

Tim Mikkelsen

Marion E Mikkelsen born January 5 1915, died December 13 1972.

He went to country school at Monroe xxx - right east of the county home. He went there till he graduated from 8th grade. Then went to Harlan school until he got sick with bright disease - as a freshman, and part of his sophomore year. Then had to drop out. He helped with the farming and helped neighbors with theirs. Then he got a job with REA (Rural Electric Association) when they were putting up electricity in the rural areas.

In 1940 he registered for the draft - When his number came up he enlisted in the National Guard in Council Bluffs with a group of other young men around Harlan. In 1941 he was sent to Louisiana for training - Camp Clayborn in La. After 6 weeks training in La. he was sent to Fort Dix. In 1942 he was sent overseas on a ship which he said was very crowded. He often talked about the terrible food on the ship. He mentioned one time he thought he had oatmeal for breakfast with raisins. But it turned out to be oatmeal with cockroaches - yuk. They were sent to Scotland where they had more training. He was stationed close to Edinburgh and met some great people there. Then he was sent to England. While there he and another soldier were riding in a jeep and they missed a curve and the jeep landed on him. (The other fellow was driving.) He hurt his shoulder real bad and didn't have much use of his arm and was in the hospital for about 3 months. So didn't get to go with the rest of his group. But was put in billeting where taught himself to type. (Billeting was bedding down the troops that came thru.) At that time he was close to Warwick - where he met Mrs. Kean (whom we met in 1966) at a Red Cross Canteen. She invited Mike and Dick Gurney from Council Bluffs to her home. She and her husband were keepers of the Judges house. Mike and Dick were both invited to the Kean's daughter's wedding. They had a great time on weekends they visited her family.

The only time he got to the front lines was when they took a group of prisoners (Americans that had gotten in trouble) up there. He was stationed in England until his return home. He came back on the Queen Mary that had just been completed.

He was sent to Ft Leonard Wood for his discharge from the Army. He didn't mention his arm (which wasn't too hot). Because then he would have had to stay there and go thru more tests. (He still couldn't raise it above his shoulder when he came home.)

