

To Mary Alyce  
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I want to tell a story today about the time I met Mary Alyce, which is really a story about Mary Alyce and David.

I'd been dating Matthew—Mary Alyce and David's son—for a few months by the summer of 2001, when Mary Alyce and David were preparing to move from Okemos, Michigan, to Berkeley, California.

"They're moving to a much smaller house," Matthew said. "Let's rent a truck and drive to Michigan. We can help them pack and take home some of the awesome furniture they're trying to get rid of."

"Great," I said.

I was excited to meet my new boyfriend's parents. I really liked my new boyfriend.

So we rent a truck and drive from Philadelphia to Michigan and arrive at the sprawling house on Small Acres Lane. Three smiling Pearson faces greet us at the door—first Susan, then Mary Alyce, then David. "Hello! Hi! Welcome!" everyone said. I believe Mary Alyce hugged me before I crossed the threshold.

"That was easy," this Jewish girl thought to herself.

The next day was spent packing. Packing packing packing. Early into the packing I exhausted my lower back and spent the afternoon unhelpfully not packing while the three Pearsons kept at it. It was swelteringly hot that weekend in Okemos, and the days were long in July. The three of them just worked. Hard.

And I had plenty of time—guiltily resting my back while everyone else worked through the punishing heat and the dust and the hauling of boxes—to reflect on a range of feelings upon being immersed in Pearsonia.

First: admiration at this active, busy family, who just show up for each other to help with the heavy lifting. (This would be the first of many such heavy lifting weekends I'd spend with members of the Pearson and Pearson-Kramer families. It is one of the small miracles of my life that I—who had decisively chosen to pursue a life of the mind—would come to love these heavy lifting weekends with this family.)

Second: awe at the fact that Mary Alyce and David were about to make such a major move from Michigan to Berkeley, and that they seemed so excited for the challenge, that they were partners in the challenge.

Whereas I had never moved from my hometown of Philadelphia (except to go to college, and that doesn't really count) and I regarded people who voluntarily picked up and moved across the country like they were cut from a wholly different cloth: so brave, open to life, less fearful.

At the end of the day we piled into the car and headed to dinner at Okemos's The Traveler's Club International Restaurant and Tuba Museum. A waiter delivered drinks. David raised his glass and said, "Well, Mary Alyce, another adventure." "Hear, hear," said Mary Alyce.

I was stunned. An *adventure*?! What the hell were they talking about? Moving is terror, moving is uncertainty, moving is risk! No one moves unless there's a gun to their heads, unless they are fleeing persecution. No one willingly embraces change. Who the hell are these life-affirming, un-neurotic people, for whom life is not a thing to be grudgingly endured but a thing to be open-heartedly embraced?

They terrify me.

I think I love them.

They were tired from packing but in that moment, the faces of Mary Alyce and David were lit with a quality I've since come to describe as "game." Game for change, game for challenge, game for adventure. And game together, as partners. In the years since then, I've had a million moments large and small to witness this spirit of Pearsonic gameness, whose very center and soul was Mary Alyce, whose life was a celebration of gameness. Gameness is the trait I adore most in my beloved, the son she raised.

In the time since that weekend, Matthew and I have moved around this country four times. We have started new jobs, started our family, learned new cities. And every time—truly, every time—I have channeled my role model parents-in-law to weather the turbulence. In times of great change I turn to Matthew and say, "Well, Mary Alyce, another adventure!" Sometimes it's a whisper through tears, "Well, Mary Alyce, another adventure!," uttered to summon my own courage. "Well, Mary Alyce, another adventure!" is the shorthand inside my own marriage that stands for life and light. I invoke the name of my glorious mother-in-law in aspiration: a prayer to be game, to be open and awake to life, to be free.

To adventure. To Mary Alyce.