



MARKING TIME

When life left me too little time to keep a journal, I resorted to my kitchen calendars. I still use them to chronicle life in shorthand, one small square at a time.

by MARSHA MCGREGOR

They offer almanacs of time moving forward: well-baby checkups, then driving lessons, then more driving lessons, then pickups for caps and gowns, then babysitting your grown child's cat.

Every crammed, 24-hour log scrawled with notes spilling into the margins suggests a family in near-constant motion, offering a reasonable response, I suppose, to the existential question, "What the hell have I been doing all these years?"

Recently, I dragged the whole disorderly lot from behind a file cabinet and stacked them in a pile. I had never really counted them — all 22 years' worth, 1996 on top, 2018 on the bottom.

For the first time, I noticed the progression of their aesthetic quality. They begin, so long ago, with blooms — Monet's waterlilies, and glossy photos of fields and forests. The lakes and boats in dreamy watercolors suggest a genteel culture and ease. One year, I graced our refrigerator with a lush calendar printed on heavy stock. Each month featured a glorious Renaissance painting of a woman in repose with a book in her hands, a cruel reminder of all the pages I wasn't turning. It was titled *The Reading Woman*. Ha!

Is it coincidence, then, that *The Reading Woman* is followed by *Rise to the Occasion: Lessons in Beating Blue Days*? It's a large, perky thing brimming with cavorting animals and well-meaning advice like, "Don't let your cherished memories become confused and infected by mindless movies and TV shows."

Sharing with our son the delicious terrors of *Jurassic Park*? Sprawling on the couch with my husband, daughter and endless episodes of *Project Runway*? Watching mindless movies and TV shows are some of my cherished memories.

After the images, I noted my scribblings. By 2005, having apparently regained a sense of humor, I relied on Gary Larson's *Far Side* calendar to guide me, with unflinching absurdity, through a string of dental surgeries, bad backs, broken fingers, ailing parents and math homework I no longer understood enough to help with.

By 2007, age and accumulated experience at last drove me to practicality. I succumbed to one of those huge, generic black and white desk calendars from OfficeMax. No flora, no fauna, no ladies of leisure. So large I had to stow it next to the fridge. They've been my go-to calendars since.

Yet every page spread before me summons days that unfolded slowly, the hours that surrendered to a child's pace. I can re-create in my mind with perfect clarity — and so can my son — a recurring ritual whereby we assembled a circle of dinosaurs and plastic

food on the living room floor to throw elaborate birthday parties for a toy rubber shark. And those long, long walks down the block. Behold the heart-shaped

stone! The broken red barrette! The flattened toad! I am romanticizing, of course. Beside the happy spaces, I have failed to mention the scary fevers, the bone-deep fatigue, the stark entries bearing witness to loss.

In 2013, Oct. 25 is circled: "Mom's funeral." On Dec. 22: "We host Christmas for family." I knew it would be the last time my frail father could manage the 40-minute ride to our home. I exhausted myself to ensure the day was perfect. Just before everyone arrived, I collapsed in bed with bronchitis.

Maybe it was easier that way, hearing through the floorboards the happy hum and clinking forks, knowing he was down there. Knowing if I had to cry a little, no one would see.

Sorting through my parents' belongings after their deaths, I found a daybook my mother kept in 1963. Jan. 18: "Scrubbing, Cleaning, Baked Raspberry Breakfast Bread." Jan. 29: "At 4:45 p.m. the female cardinal came to feeder. At 5, the male." May 11: "Went to see *The Birds* with Jack & Marilyn."

Nov. 22 is blank. Perhaps, like millions of others, she knew she would forever remember exactly where she was and what she was doing as President Kennedy's motorcade rode through Dallas.

In the arc of scribbled time, the scratched-out plans and smudged words coalesce into something resembling a cohesive whole. Life reveals itself not as a series of "this, then this, then this," but something more complicated: "This and this and this."

The week of Mom's funeral includes an appointment for senior pictures and a regional cross-country meet. Exhaustion and renewal, failure and triumph, heartache and healing, struggle and ease — all of it keeps pace with us pretty much at the same time.

Joni Mitchell once visualized our lives in the round: "We're captive on the carousel of time," she sang. "We can't return/ We can only look behind from where we came/ And go round and round and round/ In the circle game."

In search of a fitting metaphor of my own, I have settled on these slim, abbreviated archives. I flip through the years and see that, as long as I was paying attention, I have known more than my fair share of joy. Lifelines thrown my way appear too many times to count, sometimes from unexpected places. I see long stretches of contentment, the kind that is easy to take for granted, unless you take the longer view. **CE**