

[Home](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

Maddy's Suicide Note

by Jacqueline Doyle

I put Maddy's suicide note aside to keep for now. I don't know why, but it doesn't seem right to toss it into the growing pile of discarded old papers and dusty, faded green hanging folders. My mother and I have been going through my late father's files for a few days now, and have barely made a dent in them.

I'm surprised to run across the file on Maddy. Just a mass card, a copy of her eulogy, and a photocopy of her suicide note, neatly dated at the top in my father's precise handwriting: September 22, 1989. The original is in a police file in Wildwood Lakes, New Jersey. I doubt there are any other copies. In fact I wonder where Dad got his. Did he copy it before he gave it to the police? Or did he ask the police for a copy? It was the police who broke into the garage and discovered her body. But I don't know where the note was.

"Should I send this to Patrick?" my mother asks. Patrick was Maddy's long-time boyfriend. Apparently he wanted the suicide note. I remember him keeping the tape from Maddy's answering machine so that he could hear her voice. But I doubt he wants the note now, almost twenty years later.

"Are you kidding, Mom? Do you know how long it's been?" I'm finding it hard to keep the exasperation out of my voice. Going through the files has become an endless, wearying task. I don't know what we're going to do with the entire file cabinet of Irish genealogical research on the Doyles, the Kings, and the McBrides. I also don't want her to get started on Maddy, all the old grievances and resentments she won't put to rest.

The past is alive for my 81-year-old mother. The files are full of receipts and she relives every purchase, sure that her insurance company will want to know how much she and Dad spent for every souvenir they bought on every trip years ago. She is full of incongruous suggestions as we comb the files. "Your Uncle Dick might want this." "Maybe I should send this to Margie." "This could be worth something." When we discover that Dad saved every paycheck stub from his entire lifetime, she decides to put them back in the file cabinet and keep them. I'm impatient with her, but I suppose it is her way of investing value in this pile of junk. In one corner of the room sits a growing stack of materials—about six feet tall, so far—relating to Sanders & White, the naval architecture firm my father retired from some thirty years ago. She's convinced herself that one of his aging former coworkers is sure to want all of it.

She doesn't seem too surprised to find a suicide note in the midst of all this detritus. "Dear Patrick," it begins. It's on informal stationery, with Maddy F. preprinted at the top. There is no date, just "Friday" at the upper right. Maddy's handwriting is girlish, unformed, with rounded letters slanting slightly to the left. "Please understand & forgive me & help my children understand ..."

* * *

So here I am back in California a year later with a cardboard box of files and photos saved from my father's vast collection, including Maddy's suicide note. Why am I keeping a copy of it? What will I do with it?

I think of Maddy fairly often. Since her death I've kept a picture of her at eye level on the shelf to the right of my desk, and it brings her back to me. Maddy Frances McBride. Maddy McBride Baker. Maddy Baker, even after the divorce. My beautiful young aunt, closer in age

to me than to her older sister, my mother.

She's laughing in the picture, as she so often was in life. She stands waist deep in a brilliantly turquoise pool, her hands clasped on the railing that descends into the shallow end. She's sporting a gold watch, which doesn't look waterproof, but must be, and a small diamond on a chain around her neck. Her fingernails are painted a bright coral red. She's wearing a bikini with a strapless top, turquoise and pink above, pink and turquoise below. Light ripples on the water, which distorts the image of her legs below the water line. Her frosted hair falls in soft waves to her shoulders. She looks happy and carefree. I pull the photograph out of the frame to look at the back and I'm surprised to see that it was taken in April 1989, just six months before her suicide.

I can't tell if it's their pool in Florida, or at their place in New Jersey. April would probably be pretty cold in New Jersey. But I'm forgetting, she was already divorced, living in the small house in Wildwood Lakes that she and Bill shared when they were first married, the one on the highway, the one that was half real estate offices. There was no mansion on the hill any more, no condo down in Florida, but there was a pool. It must have been the first sunny day of spring. Maddy lived in bikinis in the warm weather. She was skinny, tan, and beautiful, proud of her looks. "Not bad for someone in her forties," she'd say with a wink. "Make sure I'm wearing a bikini in my casket."

Her two older sisters, ten and twelve years her senior, were both overweight. Alice, my mother, slept all the time, complaining of illnesses and chronic fatigue. She was always going on and off ineffective diets. Elaine, a heavy-set, unmarried Phys. Ed. teacher, suffered from narcolepsy and fell asleep at odd moments. But Maddy was thin as a greyhound, edgy, fashionable, always in motion, always wide awake, always laughing. My mother seemed not so secretly to resent her younger sister—for the fairy godmother role she played with me, for her wealth, her good looks, her vitality, her casual largesse, her family's carelessness with possessions. Mom and Dad never stopped talking about the photograph Bill lost, an aerial view of our first house that he used in a real estate ad, or the irresponsibility of their kids, who were kids after all, spoiled when they were young, and later caught up in drugs like so many of the overprivileged children in our rich New Jersey suburb. After the funeral, when they failed to deliver some plaque or statue that my mother was intent on returning to my great uncle's diocese, she cut off all contact with them. I don't even know where they are. They must be in their early forties now, with families of their own. I wonder if Maddy's death haunts them.

For a year I've just left all the files and pictures buried in a box at the back of a closet I never open. But now I've unearthed the suicide note and I don't know what to do with it. Where am I going to put it? Why am I keeping it?

* * *

Maddy lived with us for a while when she was in high school, an exciting time for me. Seven years old, gawky and tomboyish, I stood in awe of everything about her: her curlers, her nail polishes, her lipsticks, her madras shirts and collection of belts, her embroidered Japanese kimono, her boyfriends, her messy room, her endless phone calls. I shadowed her, and she took me everywhere. She and a boyfriend treated me to the Disney movie "Pollyanna," whose heroine thrilled me with her saccharine virtue. "I want to be just like Pollyanna," I told them earnestly. But really I wanted to be just like Maddy.

My stern father disapproved of her influence. One night she painted my fingernails bright cotton candy pink, sending him into a fury when he saw them. She didn't have any nail polish remover, it was too late to buy some, and he made her scrape the polish off, fingernail by fingernail. Maddy was interested in fashion and interior decorating, trivial pursuits to my father. She was also artistic; she drew and painted, and could easily have gone to art school, if there'd been anyone to support her talent. I treasured the coloring book where she'd colored

in a page, adding her own shading and background to the picture of a Mexican flower vendor.

She often used me as a go-between with her boyfriends, getting me on the phone to tell some boy that she'd cried all night about him, listening to their song. Their song was invariably that year's classic hit, "Dream." The Everly Brothers crooned "drea-ea-ea-ea-eam, dream, dream, dream" over and over, once in a while interjecting some lyrics: "When I feel blue, in the night/When I need you, to hold me tight/Whenever I want you, all I have to do, is dream ..."

The two dreamboats who were around the most were Phil, a good-looking, open-faced, eager hometown boy from Wildwood Lakes Public High School, and Owen, a suave, swarthy, dark-haired rich boy who lived on the lake and went to a private school. Maddy later told me that one of them died young, of a heart attack, but I don't remember which one. In her school notebooks she doodled flowers in the margins, and tried out married names, coupling Maddy Frances with boyfriends' surnames, repeated in long lists.

Marrying money was important to Maddy. After she finished secretarial school at Green Mountain College in Vermont, she married Bill Baker, who rose rapidly up and out of his mother's small real estate business in Wildwood Lakes to become one of the top earners in the state, and ultimately the CEO of a large, national real estate firm. He was good looking, a smooth-faced, Robert Redford type. When the two of them had large portraits done by a tony photographer, he looked like an aspirant for political office: blue suit, white shirt with red tie, blond hair, strong jaw with a dimple, piercing blue eyes with laugh lines. William "Bill" Baker, ready to shake your hand and make a deal. And he was a genuinely nice guy, warm and affable, steady where she was flighty, bound from the beginning for success.

Much later when their marriage hit the skids, Maddy claimed he'd never been ethnic enough for her. But she hadn't been searching for ethnic back then. For a long time they epitomized the golden couple, with two beautiful golden-haired children to complete the picture.

* * *

Maddy chose me to be the flower girl at the wedding, but in the end I couldn't because Maddy was marrying a Protestant.

It's not like we were devoutly Catholic or anything. The edict came down from my grandparents, mostly her new stepmother, a stern New England schoolteacher who married Maddy's widowed father and took him in hand. Constance filled their house with stiff, formal, pastel velvet furniture and delicate, flowered china pieces. Children couldn't sit in the parlor, or run in the house, or make any noise. She complained that she simply couldn't get Michael to put down the toilet seat, though she tried and tried. She disapproved of a lot. Everything had to be just so.

Maddy's mother died young, of cancer, when Maddy was only twelve, leaving her to live alone with her father. She claimed that he drank, and beat her. Once she ended up at the Wildwood Lakes Police Station showing them the welts on her back. But no one really believed her, not the police in our affluent small town, not the neighbors, least of all her older sisters. When her father married Constance, her home life became unbearable. Constance grounded her repeatedly, and told her she dressed like a whore. "If you have the name, you might as well play the game," Maddy joked bravely. But I think, in fact, she was sexually inhibited with her boyfriends. Grieving the loss of her mother, and maybe the loss of her father to Constance, Maddy must have been adrift, her lively defiance a mask for deeper sorrow. I don't know what crisis precipitated her ejection from her father's household, but I only learned recently that my parents took her on with great reluctance. Maddy moved into our third floor guest room to stay with us, but she had to be out once she finished high school.

I have no idea why my parents allowed Constance's wishes to keep us from Maddy's wedding. It's always been one of my regrets, that I wasn't old enough to insist on the

importance of my own wishes, the importance of Maddy. But we were inseparable after she married anyway. She and Bill lived for a short while in a prefab apartment, struggling to make ends meet while they saved for a house, and Maddy worked and studied for her real estate license. She lived in a whirlwind of happy, excited domesticity, cooking seven elaborate meals every weekend and freezing them for the week to come. They were so romantic, Bill was always bringing her gifts, she was girlishly happy, and they had lots of friends. They spent a lot of time with other young married couples, particularly real estate agents Bill worked with.

She kept up with her high school girlfriends, who were wilder, and eventually came to bad ends. Ten years later her beautiful rich girlfriend Lara breezed into Maddy's luxurious suburban home, skinny and drugged out, and stole the money in Maddy's purse and all the steaks in Maddy's basement freezer. She later died of an overdose. Her best friend Wendy, always the life of the party—she could even make my father laugh, died slowly but surely of alcoholism. At the end her beautiful face was in ruins, her belly grotesquely bloated. Maddy was the success story of the bunch.

* * *

Maddy turned out to be great at selling real estate, but she worked less as Bill became richer, and finally not at all. She dabbled in part time fashion sales, and as a travel agent, mostly devoting herself to furnishing their small house, then a bigger one, and then a vastly bigger one, in lavish style, and to extravagant bouts of spending. She loved to shop. Her walk-in closet was overflowing with colorful cashmere and silk and wool, redolent with her perfume. Her taste leaned to the nouveau riche, especially in the second house, carpeted in white, with a massive glass dining table, elaborate chandelier, and a wall of smoked mirrors with gold designs. Cheerfully flamboyant, she enjoyed flaunting her wealth and pampering her family and friends.

She lived life on the run, full of nervous energy, always in motion. When she wasn't carpooling the kids, or teaching them to swim, or playing tennis, or playing golf, or lunching with girlfriends or priests, or cooking gourmet meals, or teaching catechism at the church, she spent hours on the telephone. She'd walk around the kitchen, the receiver cupped to one ear with her shoulder, long cord dangling, and clean up invisible spots with a damp paper towel, straightening, wiping, polishing as she talked. Maddy liked everything to be perfect, and it usually was.

Generous with her time and money and advice, she remained a fairy godmother to me as I grew up, treating me to haircuts my mother wouldn't pay for, and to the kind of expensive clothes my mother said we couldn't afford. Every Christmas she gave me an outfit from Saks Fifth Avenue. Every Christmas I took it back, for the sheer excitement of shopping at such a grand department store during a sale. I babysat Maddy and Bill's two children from birth on, entering into the family's apparently charmed life, even vacationing with them in Florida as resident nanny and niece. At night, the children asleep, I sat in Bill's plush black chair in their Wildwood Lakes living room, surveying their glass and crystal, listening to my records on their state-of-the-art stereo: Eric Clapton, the Doors, Janis Joplin, the Rolling Stones. Once, to my great mortification, they came home early and caught me trying on one of Maddy's dresses—a long black and white dress with a leotard top and matching shawl that I fancied. I hastily returned the dress to the walk-in closet with trembling fingers, leaving it crooked on the hanger. Now that the Summer of Love was sweeping the nation, and a carefree life on the road beckoned, I no longer wanted to be Maddy, but I didn't mind trying her life on for size, once in a while.

I was growing away from what I called capitalism, really the conspicuous consumption of wealthy suburban New Jersey. After I left for college I saw less of Maddy. During a year in

Ireland, and three years in Germany, I didn't come home at all. She rescued me, though, when my marriage to a German political science student fell apart, and I needed time and a place to nurse my grief and recover from my hurt. I curled up on the chaise lounge by their pool in Florida, listening to the hushed, rhythmic roar of the ocean waves, and to Maddy's nonstop advice about getting up and playing tennis. When I married for the second time she was thrilled, immediately producing an article from a woman's magazine on how to get pregnant in your thirties. She flew out to California to visit after my son was born, and bought us a brand new chair to replace our thrift store one when the springs gave out while she was sitting in it.

That was the year that she died. Her divorce was final, and she was having money problems. Her relationship to Bill, who'd remarried, and her children, was shaky. Things didn't seem to be working out with her boyfriend Patrick. Her back gave her constant pain, she gobbled painkillers, even checked into the hospital for back surgery, but changed her mind. In the hospital she began acting strangely, rearranging the furniture, flirting seductively with the doctor, infecting everyone around her with a kind of mad enthusiasm. She'd been diagnosed as bipolar some years before, but no one was thinking about that, least of all Maddy. By the time four of her close friends persuaded my parents to have Maddy committed, it was really too late. Wrapped in the private codes of her indecipherable universe, Maddy couldn't be reached.

Her suicide note, though, was perfectly lucid.

* * *

I learn somewhere that fewer than 20% of suicides leave a note.

Maddy's note keeps expanding and shrinking in my imagination. Originally I heard that it was only a line: "It really is better this way." Maybe it was my mother giving me the gist of it. For years the line haunted me. "It really is better this way."

Then when I find it in my father's files, I'm surprised that it's pages long, mostly about her children. At least that's the way I remember it, during the year it's packed away in the cardboard box in my closet. But in fact when I pull it out, it changes again. I find that in reality it's neither very short nor very long, and that the line "It really is better this way," which I can so distinctly hear in Maddy's voice, doesn't appear in the letter.

In its entirety, it reads:

Friday

Dear Patrick—

Please understand & forgive me & help my children understand. I can't stand being a burden to everyone anymore & there's something inside me that can't go on without being a burden. Please know that this has nothing to do with anyone but me & it is best for everyone this way.

I'm sorry I caused everyone so much worry & upset.

I love you very much Patrick—I love my children & my sisters & I can't be a burden anymore—

Please pray for me

Love

Maddy

It looks like it may have been folded in half, with "Patrick" written on the outside and underlined. There's no date, and I'm confused by the time line. My father has written "September 22, 1989" in red fine-point marker next to Maddy's "Friday." The mass card for Maddy's funeral on September 29 bears the date "September 25, 1989." It was several days, I think, before they found her body. Did she commit suicide on the 22nd, and did her lifeless body lie in the garage for three days? Or did she write the note on Friday, and commit suicide on Saturday or Sunday or Monday? There's no one to ask, and maybe it isn't important.

There's no end punctuation after "Please pray for me." It's as if she realized that she had initiated something that would have no end.

* * *

Maddy was only 47, almost 48 when she died, much younger than I am now.

She'd been dead for a year when I suffered a breakdown and ended up in the hospital, diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder. I was 38, almost 39. She must have been diagnosed as bipolar at about the same age, but no one in the family knew anything about manic depression or its medical treatment then. When she told us that her doctor had said she should just take the lithium when she felt like she needed it, it sounded okay to us. Shortly before her death, when her holistic chiropractor urged her to detox from all her medications, it sounded kind of New Agey, but okay too.

I don't remember anything like mood swings, or the course of her disease. But Maddy was always a little manic, high-spirited and nervously active, prone to spontaneous gestures that crossed the line. It often made Bill nervous. He didn't like it when she mooned her opponents on the tennis court, or spoke her mind so openly, or became the lively center of attention at parties. She held strong opinions, and stirred up the town when her Jewish friends, the Weinbergs, were denied membership in the River's Edge Country Club. "Jesus was a Jew," she pointed out in an excited letter that she showed everyone. "It's not because they're Jewish, it's because they're pushy," my mother hissed to me, irate—though not herself a member of the country club. It's probably what a lot of people were saying, in the privacy of their own homes. It's what a lot of people in Wildwood Lakes said about Jews.

Like many bipolars, Maddy often stirred things up. Bill didn't think it was very good for his business. The Weinbergs, owners of the local pharmacy, may not have appreciated the publicity either.

Maddy's first psychotic break, what I know of it, occurred when an episode of insane jealousy ballooned into jealous insanity. She and Bill had some kind of falling out with their best friends, Jean-Pierre and Connie, and when it was patched up, Connie told her, "I'm so glad. There's always been something special between me and Bill, and I couldn't bear to lose that." Maybe Maddy was overreading, but probably not. I wonder at Connie's strong attraction to Bill, good-looking but bland compared to Jean-Pierre, with his French accent, and craggy, compellingly sexy ugliness. But this seems very suburban, especially in the wake of the sexually permissive sixties: two couples, always together, one of the spouses drawn into a clandestine affair with the forbidden other. I don't think they had an affair, but plenty of suburbanites did. Maddy and Bill were fascinated by their German neighbors, particularly voluptuous Heidi's earthy sexuality and open promiscuity. She used to swim naked every night in Maddy and Bill's swimming pool, with Bill hovering at the window, unable to tear his eyes away from her glistening body—her European-style hairy armpits, and the thick black bush of vaginal hair that climbed her abdomen in a thin line to her belly button. When Maddy asked her why she didn't get it waxed, Heidi replied with a throaty laugh, "Because men love

it."

I imagine a kind of psychotic fugue. Overcome with jealousy of Connie, the universe become a vast chamber booming with her own heartbeat, Maddy sat on the white carpet of their basement family room surrounded by photo albums: dozens of pictures of Maddy and Bill with Jean-Pierre and Connie, Maddy and Connie, Jean-Pierre and Connie, Bill and Connie, Maddy and Bill and Connie. With tiny, sharp, bright silver manicure scissors, she meticulously cut Connie out of every single picture. Mangled, crumpled paper dolls of Connie littered the floor like confetti. Picture after picture with a woman missing filled the albums, each showing the clear detailed outlines of an absence.

Except Connie is still alive, and it is Maddy that is missing.

* * *

Maddy's friends overflowed the church at her funeral, crowds and crowds of friends. Many of her golf partners were priests, and they thronged the altar, intoning the service in surreal unison. I find their names listed on my father's copy of Monsignor John Murphy's eulogy, written in a spidery hand that I can barely read. In true Catholic fashion, they appear by rank. First the Monsignors, all six of them, then the Fathers, five of them, with a sixth name and the parenthetical note that he would have been there, but had to preside over another funeral. "Maddy Baker now rests in the hands of God. She's at peace and she's happy," Monsignor Murphy closed his eulogy. "And maybe, just maybe, now she'll be able to hit that three-wood. May she rest in peace."

At the funeral, I felt breathless and claustrophobic, dizzy from the clouds of incense, the cloying fragrance of the flowers, and the press of so many bodies, confused by the strangeness of the large crowd of elaborately-robed priests and the Monsignor's vision of heaven as a vast golf course. I shifted in the pew, uncomfortably aware that Maddy's corpse lay in the heavy coffin heaped with banks of flowers—with the top screwed down so that she couldn't breathe. I took comfort in the chubby arms of my one-year-old son around my neck, burying my nose in the moist warmth of his tiny body, which smelled of baby powder and my own milk and, faintly, of urine.

Maddy's two children sat in the front pew, formal and solemn faced, along with Bill and his new wife and her beautiful, sullen-faced daughter, and Maddy's long-time boyfriend Patrick, who threw a real Irish wake at one of his restaurants after the service, complete with a pianist playing sentimental Irish ballads and rollicking Irish jigs. It was a bit strange for a death by suicide, but Patrick was probably right. Maddy would have loved it.

Maddy's affair with Patrick O'Shea started long before her marriage ended, though I don't know whether Bill or her children ever knew that. Patrick seemed an unlikely choice—portly, short, almost grotesque, a red-faced Irish-American with easy ways and a genial laugh. Patrick favored plaid jackets and garish ties. He owned a number of restaurants in the area, some of them quite posh, though he was best known for his thriving chain of low budget steakhouses, "Paddy's Tavern." He liked to spend money. And that's at least part of what attracted Maddy.

Maddy was showing him real estate properties when he made his first overture, slipping her a beautifully wrapped, very large bottle of very expensive perfume. Apparently he impressed her. They used to meet in out-of-the-way places. Once, she told me, she wore only lacy underwear and a trench coat, to surprise him. She spent a lot of time scouting Catholic churches, looking for a priest who would give her absolution for her adulterous affair. By the time her divorce came through, she was more than ready to marry Patrick, and he claimed he wanted to marry her too. But she wanted a Catholic wedding, and he'd never gotten an annulment for his first marriage, to a woman still managing one of his restaurants. He dragged

his feet, he put her off. Bill, possibly on the advice of his divorce attorney, made insincere noises about getting back together, throwing her off balance. Maddy despaired during the divorce proceedings, and after them.

She checked into rehab, though no one was under the impression that she was abusing drugs or alcohol. She worried about her pending back surgery. It was hard to know what was going on with her, when we talked on the phone. Her relationship with her daughter was falling apart, she felt unsure of her future with Patrick, her back was killing her, the dark clouds were gathering.

* * *

On Thursday, September 21, 1989, Hurricane Hugo swept across Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Montserrat, St. Croix, Antigua, Guadeloupe, crashing into the coast of South Carolina, wreaking \$10 billion dollars in damage, leaving 56,000 homeless in the Carolinas alone, claiming thirty-five lives in four states, and forty more lives outside the United States. By September 22 it died down somewhere over the forests of Canada. It was the largest and most devastating hurricane that the U.S. had ever experienced, until Hurricanes Andrew and Katrina, which you didn't live to see. Did you even notice, or were you caught in the center of your own spinning universe and emotional wreckage? Were you calm, in the eye of the storm, at the end?

I picture you lying on the floor of the garage as your car spews out carbon monoxide fumes. Or were you sitting in the car? No one told me. I don't know what you were wearing when you died, or when you were laid out in your casket. Clothes were important to you. I'd like to know.

Your garage was spotless, like the rest of your house. Maybe it was even partly carpeted.

But the floor would have been cold, cold.

What were you thinking, as you waited for death? "It really is better this way"? Caught up in the passion of your convictions, you were often so sure of your beliefs. But did you really sustain that belief, right to the end, as you peered over the edge at death? Did you think twice, when it was already too late?

What had you been saying, in your rehab support groups, that convinced you that it really is better this way?

Hearing rumors that recovering addicts write reports of their dysfunctional families, my parents raced over to Maddy's house when Maddy's body was discovered, intent on gathering up whatever incriminating papers they could find before anyone else looked at them. There was no report on the family. I looked through the brown grocery bag of odd doodlings and scraps of paper and reminders when I flew in for the funeral, and found two poignant jottings in Maddy's hand: "I miss my Mommy. Mommy always stroked my hair when I was sick, and gave me peppermints to put under my tongue." And another short one, "God touched me on the shoulder."

Maddy possessed a simple, luminous, almost child-like faith. Did it sustain her through her death? Or did she die believing she was one of the damned, condemned for eternity because she had broken the Church's commandment against suicide? I think her God was a merciful one. Was He there with her, at the end?

It's so hard to be with her, in those last hours. She would have flushed pink. The carbon monoxide surely caused nausea, convulsions, delirium, even visions. How long did it last? What was she thinking, as the chill from the concrete floor penetrated her bones? What did

she see? Did her mother Frances appear, ready to stroke her hair, to wrap her arms around her in a soft, warm embrace?

It really is better this way ... it's so cold, so cold, my face is so hot, I feel so sick ... so cold, so dizzy, where am I, am I ... am I really dying?

am I really, I am really,

so cold, so hot, so sick,

is this really ... the end?

is it really

really is

this way

* * *

"Once a man decides to take his own life he enters a shut-off, impregnable but wholly convincing world where every detail fits and each incident reinforces his decision," A. L. Alvarez writes. "The world of the suicide is superstitious, full of omens." What omens did you see, Maddy, in the days leading up to September 22, 1989? Did the rustle of falling leaves remind you of the passing of life? Did the gray autumn skies and cold winds make you shiver? Did far off cheers from the football field remind you that the glories of high school were long gone? Did the rustling pages of the newspaper fall open to the marriage announcements? Did the smiling brides and grooms stare at you? Did the photographs of the dead in the obituaries whisper to you? Did you think the hurricane in the headlines was headed for you?

The luxurious green Saab that became the vehicle of your death was a recent purchase. "It's green, the color of money," you told me, laughing and excited at the prospect of earning money in real estate again. But the costly advertisements in the New York Times to sell a multimillion-dollar farm to wealthy Manhattanites had fallen flat.

"Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home, your house is burning, your children are gone." Your children were gone, your daughter rebellious and truculent, living, you said, with a cocaine dealer. Everything was burning, or blowing away. What had happened to the golden family and the future full of promise?

Were the omens and portents against you?

I can never know. I piece together a life from an envelope of photographs, and shuffle through memories thirty, forty, fifty years old. I research suicide, I read about manic depression, I ask questions, but all that I am left with is your absence and a suicide note. You reach out from the afterlife, across the bridge of years: "Dear Patrick—Please understand & forgive me ..."

"It really is better this way." But I know it isn't. Your letter has reached me, with no return address for a reply. I wish I could reach you with a letter of my own. Say to you, "Stop, it really isn't better this way. Look in your eyes in the mirror, look in your heart, look at all those who love you, and live."

"The sadness will last forever," Van Gogh said after his final suicide attempt. It was the last thing he said before he died. "The sadness will last forever."

Copyright 2010, Jacqueline Doyle. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

Jacqueline Doyle lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she teaches literature and writing at California State University, East Bay. Her recent creative nonfiction, flash fiction, and lyric prose has appeared in a variety of journals, including *Flashquake*, *Six Sentences*, *SoMa Literary Review*, *JuiceBox*, and *Glossolalia*. Her interview with Dorothy Allison is forthcoming this spring in *Arroyo Literary Review*.