



A Year of Mourning

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ABSTRACT

This paper features excerpts from a book-length diary comic that chronicles a year of mourning after my father's death. The narrative weaves together reflections on his illness and passing, while exploring the complex role of being a son, a doctor, and a bioethicist—someone deeply informed, yet powerless to change the course of his decline.



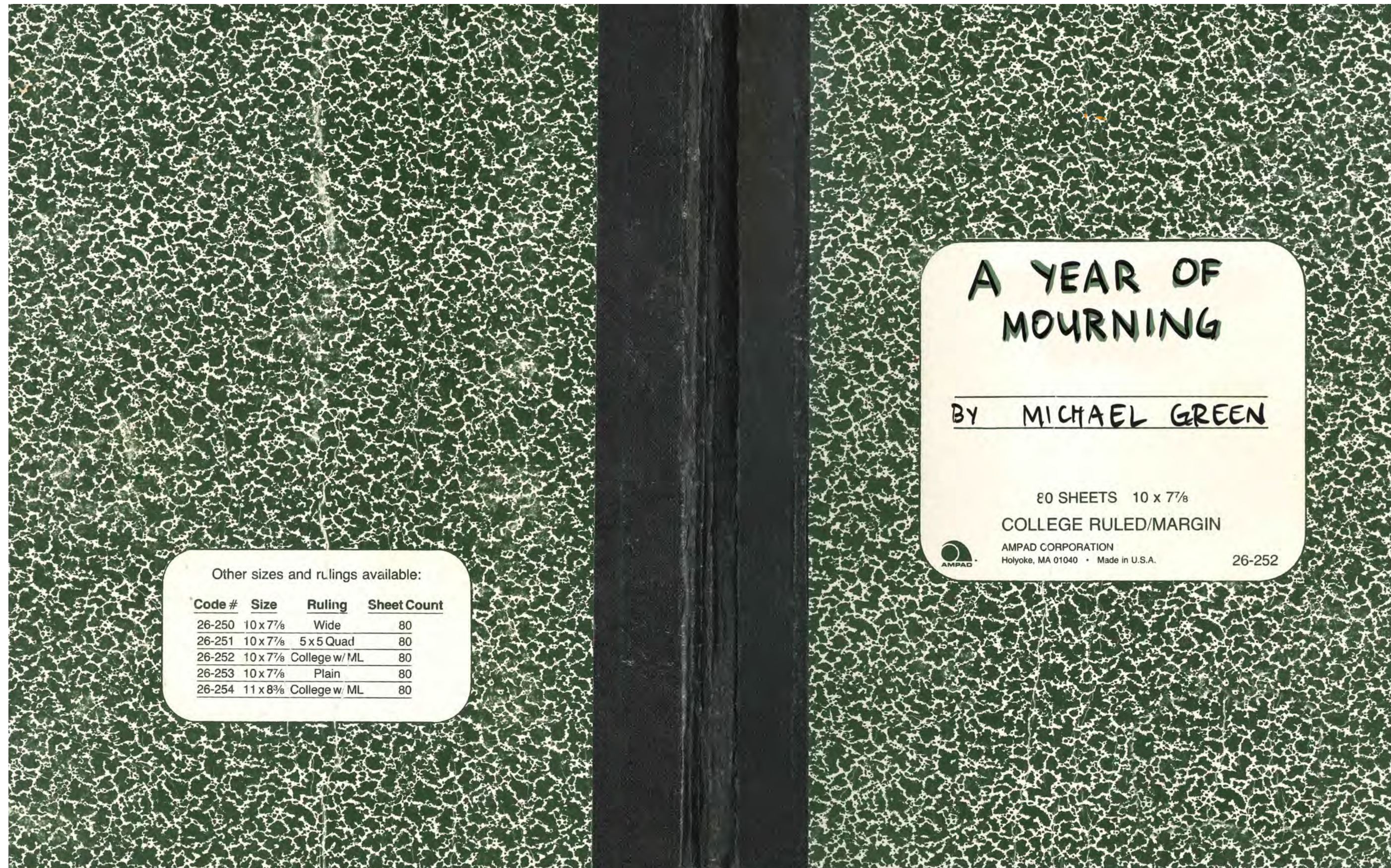
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A YEAR OF MOURNING

BY **MICHAEL GREEN**

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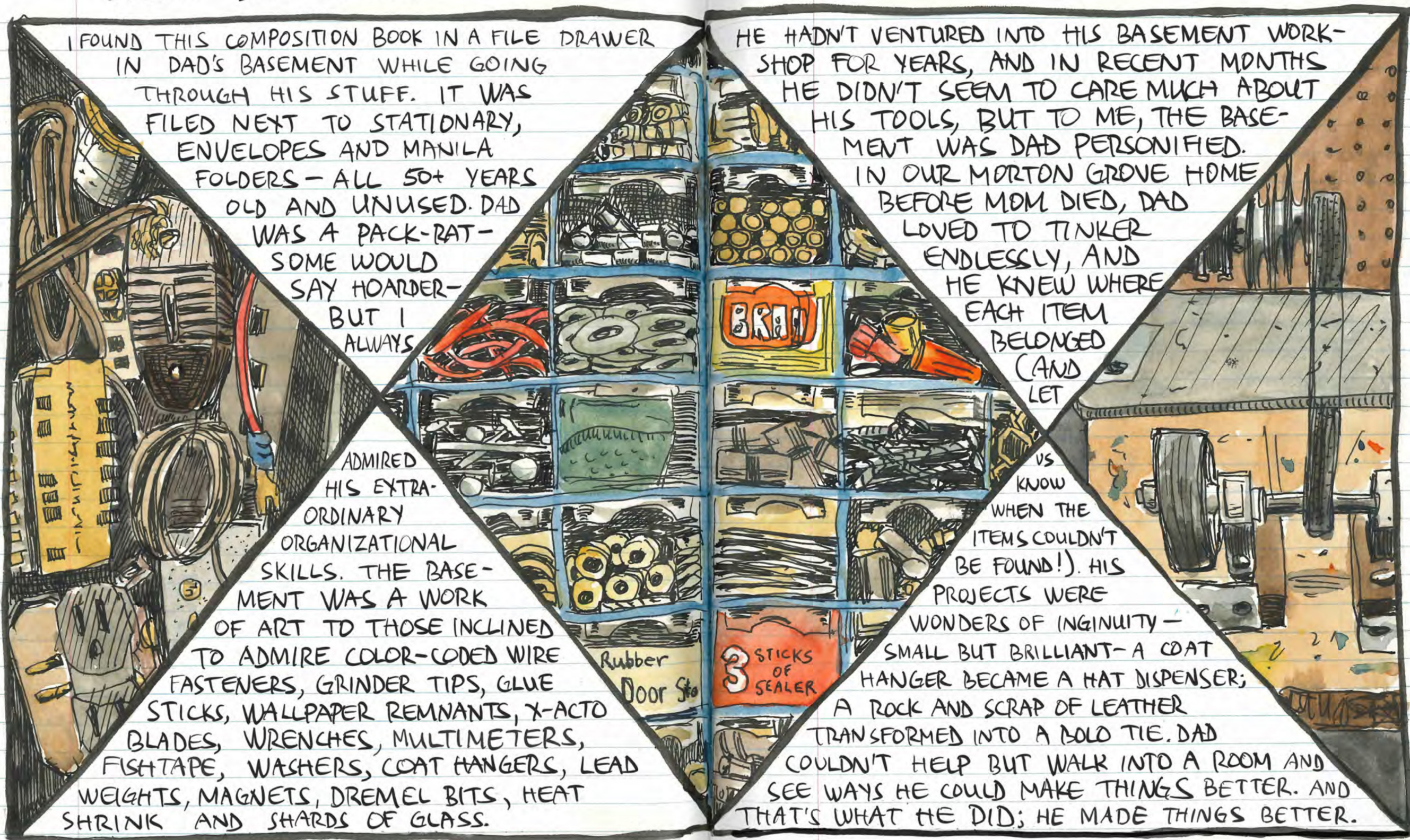
DAD'S BASEMENT

I FOUND THIS COMPOSITION BOOK IN A FILE DRAWER IN DAD'S BASEMENT WHILE GOING THROUGH HIS STUFF. IT WAS FILED NEXT TO STATIONARY, ENVELOPES AND MANILA FOLDERS - ALL 50+ YEARS OLD AND UNUSED. DAD WAS A PACK-RAT - SOME WOULD SAY HOARDER - BUT I ALWAYS

ADMIRER HIS EXTRA-ORDINARY ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS. THE BASEMENT WAS A WORK OF ART TO THOSE INCLINED TO ADMIRE COLOR-CODED WIRE FASTENERS, GRINDER TIPS, GLUE STICKS, WALLPAPER REMNANTS, X-ACTO BLADES, WRENCHES, MULTIMETERS, FISHTAPE, WASHERS, COAT HANGERS, LEAD WEIGHTS, MAGNETS, DREMEL BITS, HEAT SHRINK AND SHARDS OF GLASS.

HE HADN'T VENTURED INTO HIS BASEMENT WORKSHOP FOR YEARS, AND IN RECENT MONTHS HE DIDN'T SEEM TO CARE MUCH ABOUT HIS TOOLS, BUT TO ME, THE BASEMENT WAS DAD PERSONIFIED. IN OUR MORTON GROVE HOME BEFORE MOM DIED, DAD LOVED TO TINKER ENDLESSLY, AND HE KNEW WHERE EACH ITEM BELONGED (AND LET

VS KNOW WHEN THE ITEMS COULDN'T BE FOUND!). HIS PROJECTS WERE WONDERS OF INGINUITY - SMALL BUT BRILLIANT - A COAT HANGER BECAME A HAT DISPENSER; A ROCK AND SCRAP OF LEATHER TRANSFORMED INTO A BOLD TIE. DAD COULDN'T HELP BUT WALK INTO A ROOM AND SEE WAYS HE COULD MAKE THINGS BETTER. AND THAT'S WHAT HE DID; HE MADE THINGS BETTER.



JULY 7, 2022

GLENVIEW TERRACE

MY FATHER DIED YESTERDAY, AFTER A LONG DECLINE WITH DEMENTIA FOLLOWING A SERIES OF STROKES. COVID FINALLY DID HIM IN - HE WAS IN A NURSING FACILITY WITH 24 SUPPLEMENTAL CAREGIVERS WHO LOOKED OUT FOR HIM - FEEDING, TOILETING AND ADVOCATING FOR HIS INTERESTS - WHEN HE CONTRACTED A "MILD" CASE OF COVID.

DAILY REPORTS SAID HE

JUNE 12 2022

WAS DOING WELL - NO COUGH, NO SHORTNESS OF BREATH, NO FEVERS - BUT

WHEN HE EMERGED FROM ISOLATION 2 DAYS AGO, MY BROTHER DAN AND SISTER DEBBIE NOTED HE WAS EMACIATED, THIRSTY, AND HAD A DEEP, NASTY COUGH. DEBBIE INQUIRED ABOUT HIS 15 POUND WEIGHT LOSS OVER 10 DAYS, AND WAS TOLD THAT

END OF AN ERA...



"WE DON'T FORCE FEED PEOPLE HERE," BUT I WONDER, DID THEY TRY? DAD LOVED TO EAT (FOOD AND HARMONICA WERE HIS MAIN LOVES IN HIS FINAL MONTHS) SO I CAN'T ESCAPE THE FEELING THAT THE REPORTS OF HIM "DOING WELL" MEANT LITTLE MORE THAN HE WAS NOT CAUSING THE STAFF ANY TROUBLE. AND, THE ISOLATION MEANT HE HAD NO

MY LAST VISIT WITH DAD

ONE TO ADVOCATE FOR HIM AND HE COULDN'T DO SO HIMSELF. SO, IN THE END, COVID KILLED HIM, LIKE SO MANY OTHER VULNERABLE PEOPLE IN NURSING HOMES AND INSTITUTIONS AROUND THE WORLD.

THOUGH HIS FINAL EVENT APPEARS TO BE A LARGE BLEED IN HIS NECK, SO MUCH ELSE CONTRIBUTED TO HIS DEATH, AND IT'S SO SAD.

FISHING IN THE 1970S



"5-MINUTE JOB"

"I'VE GOT A 5-MINUTE JOB FOR YOU." DAD ALWAYS STARTED THIS WAY WHEN HE WANTED HELP WITH A PROJECT. "GET ME YOUR GLUE GUN AND A COFFEE CAN - A HAMMER TOO." I UNDERSTOOD THE GLUE GUN - DAD COULD FIX ANYTHING WITH HOT GLUE AND WIRE COAT HANGERS. BUT I DIDN'T GET THE



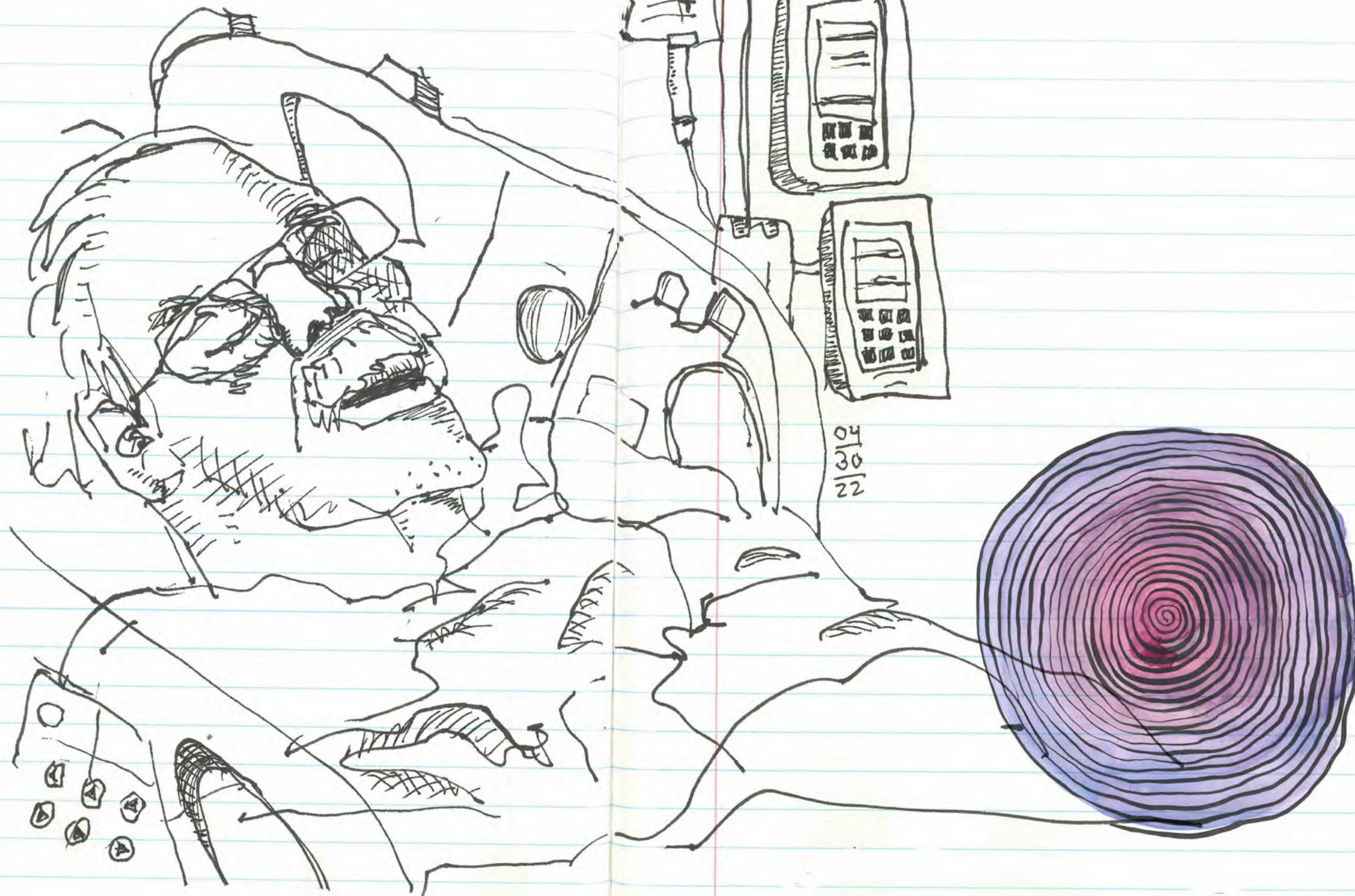
PART ABOUT THE COFFEE CAN AND HAMMER. DAD FIXED WHAT WAS BROKEN, THEN ASKED ME "WHERE DO YOU PUT THE HOT GLUE GUN?" HE THEN TOOK THE COFFEE CAN, SMASHED THE EDGE AND SIDE WITH THE HAMMER, AND PLACED THE STILL-HOT GLUE GUN IN THE NOW PERFECT CONTAINER. 30 YEARS LATER, I STILL USE THAT TIN CAN...



DAD DIED ON WEDNESDAY, I FLEW TO CHICAGO ON THURSDAY, ATTENDED HIS FUNERAL ON FRIDAY, AND SAT SHIVA ON SUNDAY AND MONDAY. TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY, WE CLEANED OUT HIS OFFICE/BEDROOM AND BEGAN TO DECLUTTER HIS BASEMENT. THEN, MY SIBINGS AND I PARTED WAYS AND I HEADED

TOWN TO THE GRAPHIC MEDICINE CONFERENCE, WHERE MY HAPPY AND ENERGETIC FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES PROVIDED A STARK CONTRAST TO THE HEAVINESS OF THE PRECEDING DAYS. IT WAS DIFFICULT TO STAY PRESENT WHEN MY THOUGHTS WERE ON DAD - AND WHAT TO DO WITH ALL HIS STUFF!

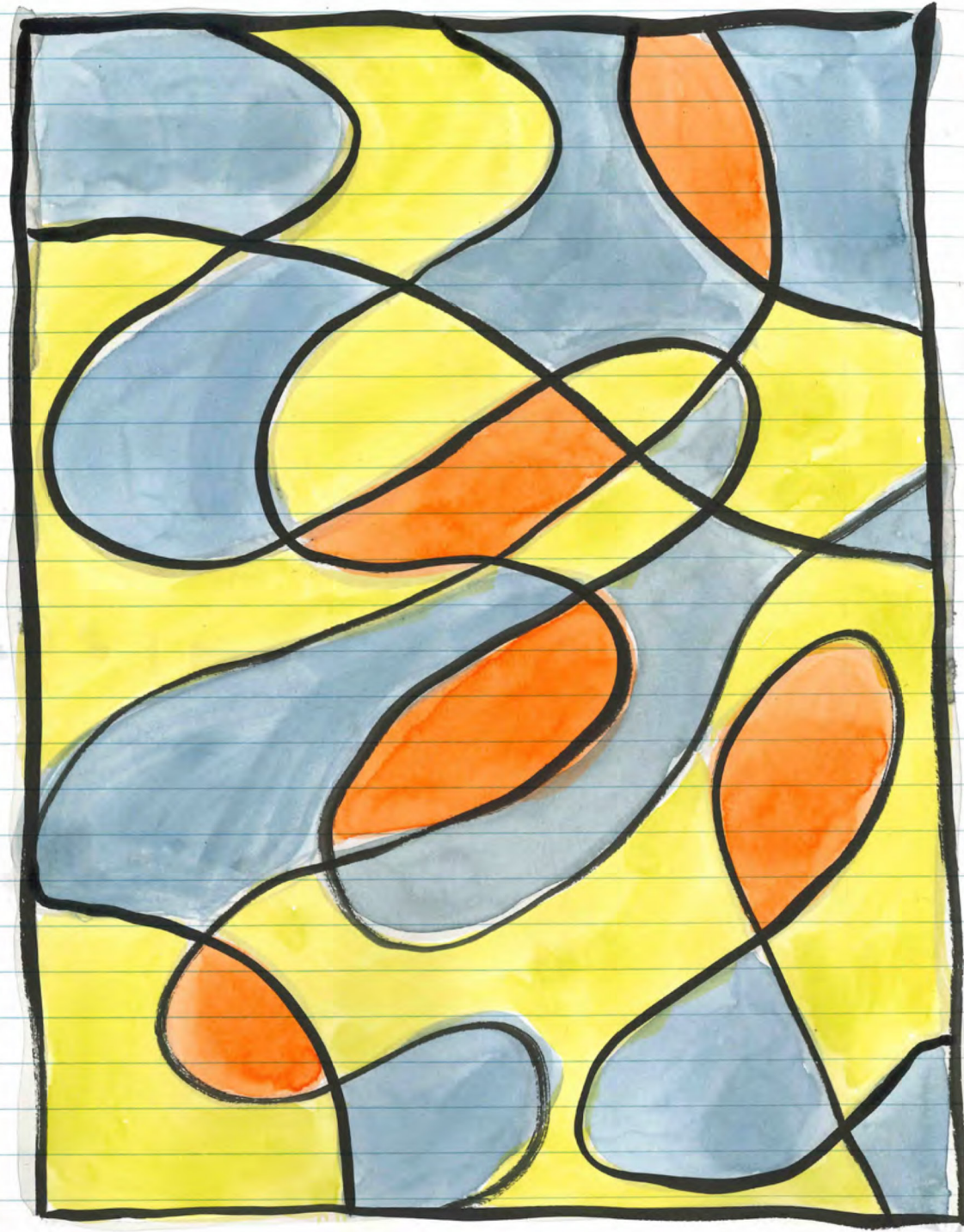




MEL GREEN

SEPT 11, 1934 - JULY 6, 2022

TURBULENCE



TRAVEL

IN THE YEAR OR TWO BEFORE DAD DIED, I MADE FREQUENT VISITS TO CHICAGO TO CHECK UP ON HIM AND TO HELP TO THE EXTENT I WAS ABLE. THE TRIPS WERE INTENSE AND OFTEN EMOTIONAL AS MY SIBLINGS AND I TRIED TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WAS BEST FOR DAD WHEN THERE WERE NO CLEAR ANSWERS AND WE DIDN'T ALWAYS SEE EYE-TO-EYE.

TRAVEL WAS ALSO COMPLICATED BY MY OWN HEALTH PROBLEMS, AS I STRUGGLED WITH A HERNIATED DISC IN MY BACK AND PAINFUL SCIATICA.

ALL THIS TOOK PLACE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, WHICH HEIGHTENED EVERYBODY'S SENSE OF ISOLATION AND VULNERABILITY.



TORNADOES

THESE TRIPS TO CHICAGO ARE SO DIFFICULT! WE ARRIVED ON SUNDAY MORNING AT 8:00 AM, AFTER A SLEEPLESS NIGHT AND 5:00 AM WAKE-UP CALL. THE PLAN WAS TO HEAD TO MY BROTHER DAN'S HOUSE AND THEN VISIT DAD. BUT DAN TESTED POSITIVE FOR COVID.... INSTEAD, WE HAD BREAKFAST, VISITED DAD (AND HAD A LOVELY TIME SITTING OUTDOORS) THEN WENT TO HIS HOUSE TO GO THROUGH HIS FILES AND OTHER STUFF. WE RETRIEVED SOME IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS AND GOT A SENSE OF WHAT'S THERE. THEN, DROVE TO SISTER DEBBIE'S, TOOK A WALK WITH MY NIECE, (OUTDOOR AND MASKED AS SHE "HAD A COLD"), HAD DINNER AND CRASHED.



DAY 2, MONDAY. MY NIECE TESTS (+) FOR COVID, WE REWIRE DEBBIE'S INTERNET, MY WIFE LISA TAKES A SWIM, TORNADOES ENGULF TO CITY, WE SPEAK WITH OUR LAWYER, AND WE PLAN FOR A FAMILY CONVERSATION TO "DISCUSS MEL'S FUTURE." MY SIBLINGS AND I SPEND HOURS PREPPING, BUT THE MEETING IS A SHIT SHOW. IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL THIS, I GET A CALL FROM MY DAUGHTER SAYING THERE IS A GAS LEAK IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO? (URGENT!!!) MEANWHILE, THE SKIES ARE BLACK, THE WIND IS HOWLING, THE CONVERSATION IS BLEAK AND MY BACK IS KILLING ME.



DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

I AM A TRAINED BIOETHICIST, AN EXPERIENCED PHYSICIAN, AND AN NIH-FUNDED RESEARCHER WHO HAS PUBLISHED NUMEROUS PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES ON THE TOPICS OF ADVANCE CARE PLANNING AND SURROGATE DECISION-MAKING.

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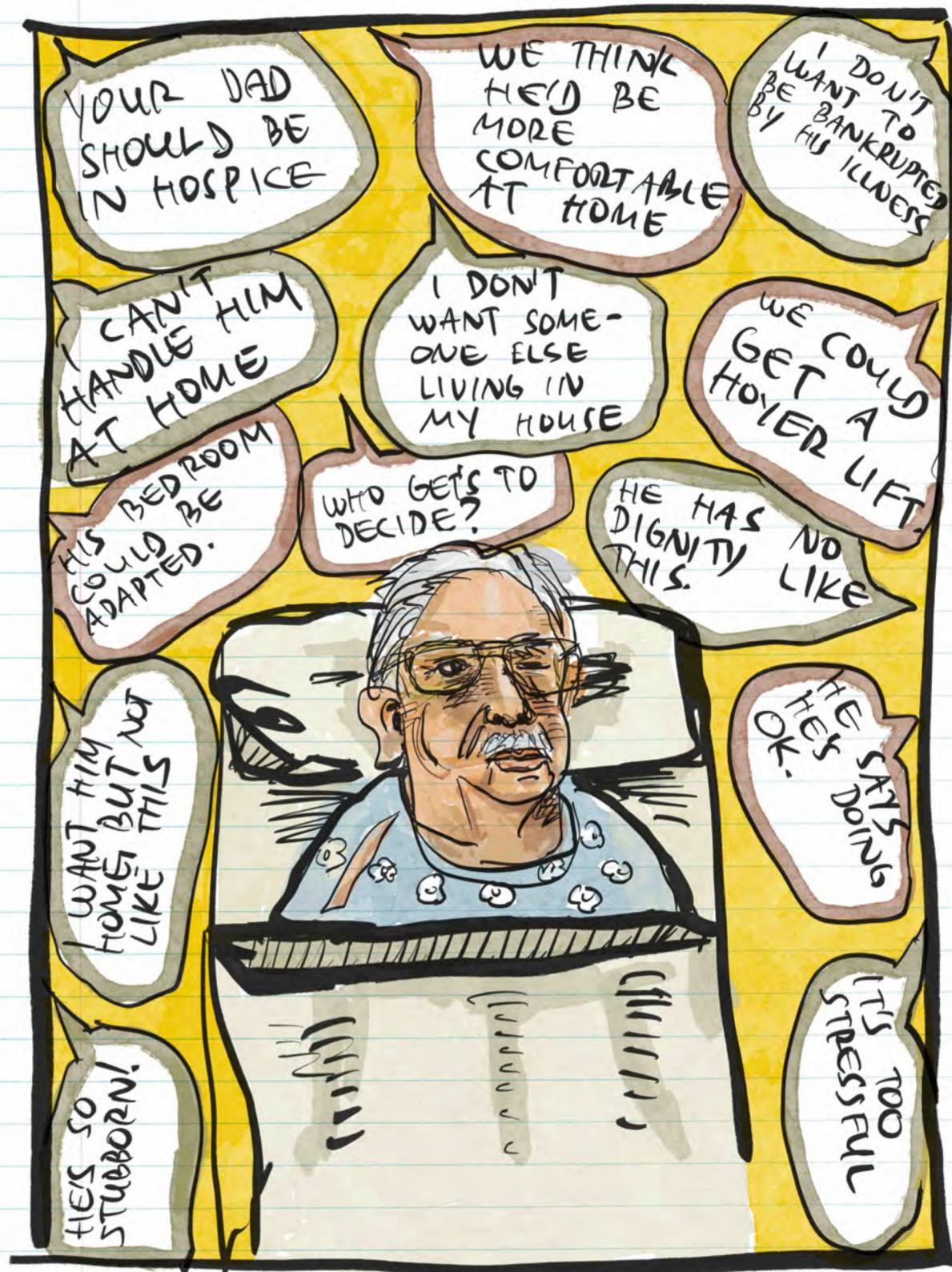
TEACH MEDICAL STUDENTS ABOUT THIS TOPIC, I HAVE FACILITATED COUNTLESS FAMILY DISCUSSIONS, AND I HAVE MEDIATED CONFLICTS AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS, DOCTORS, NURSES, AND OTHERS. IN SHORT, I'M NO NOVICE.



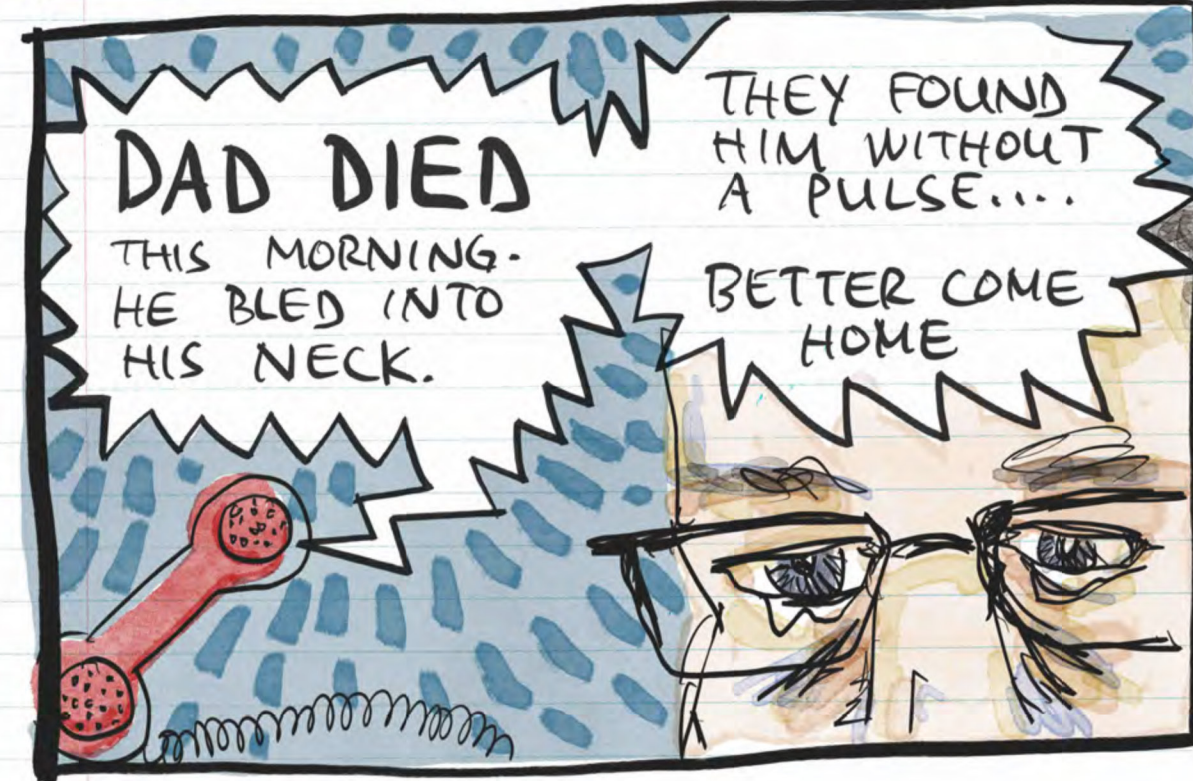
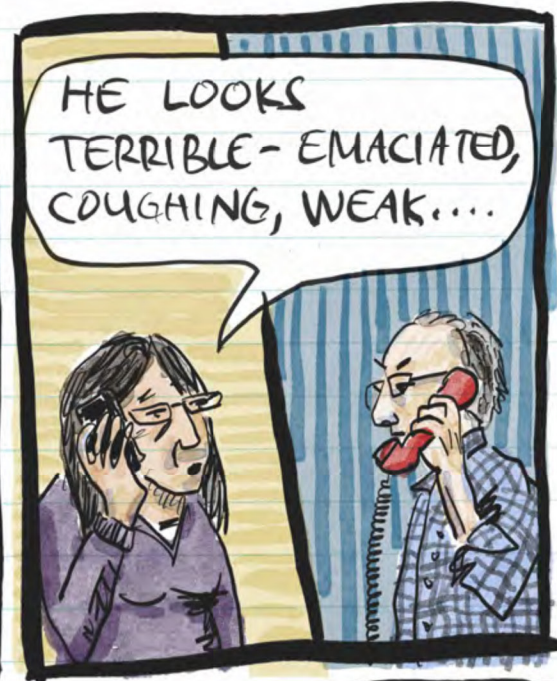
"MEL" 1945

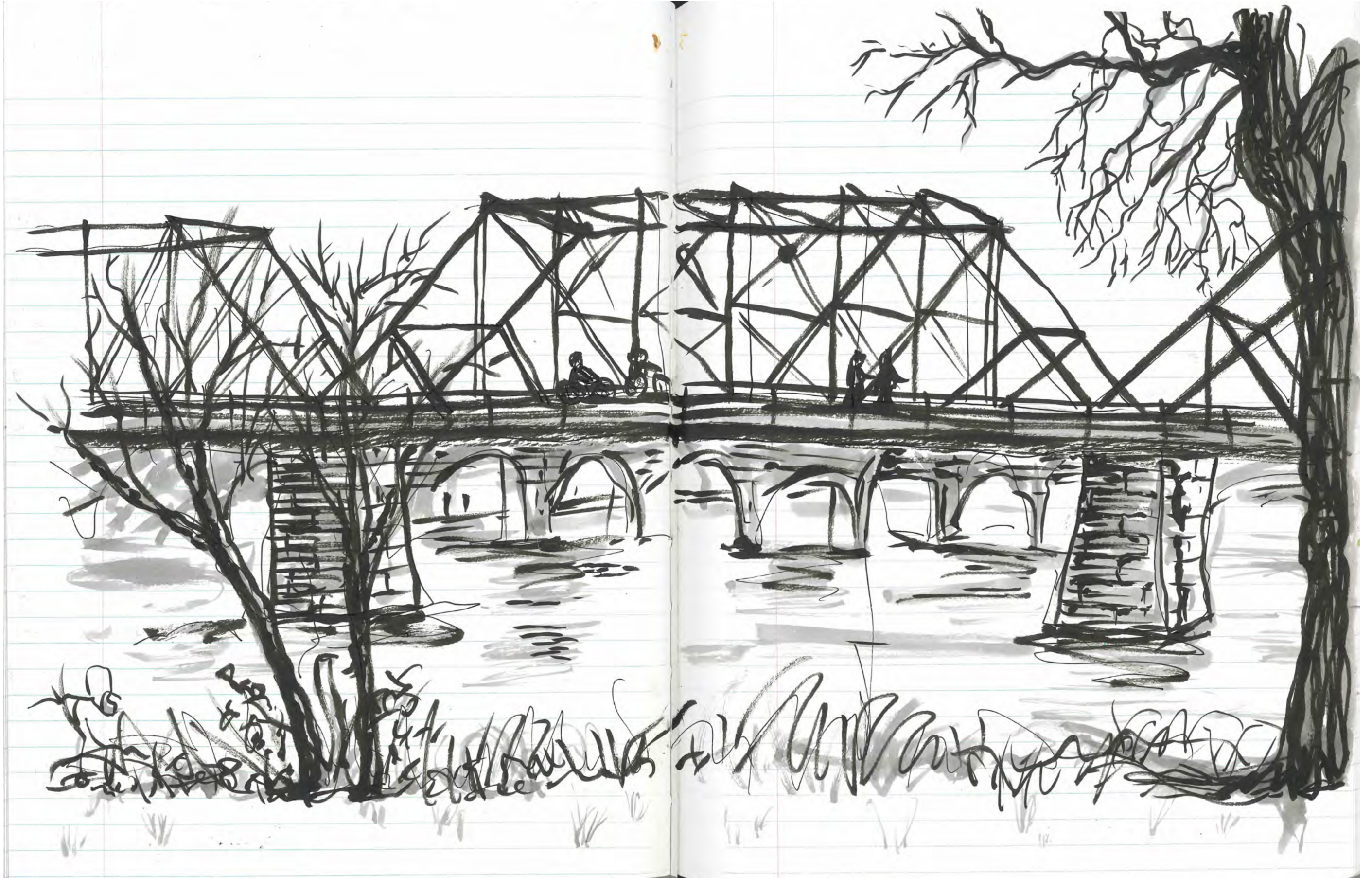
NONETHESS, WHEN I HAD TO DEAL WITH THESE ISSUES WITH MY OWN FAMILY, ALL THE SKILLS AND EXPERIENCES PROVED TO BE ONLY MARGINALLY HELPFUL. FAMILY DYNAMICS AND CONFLICTING VIEWS ABOUT WHAT IS THE "RIGHT"

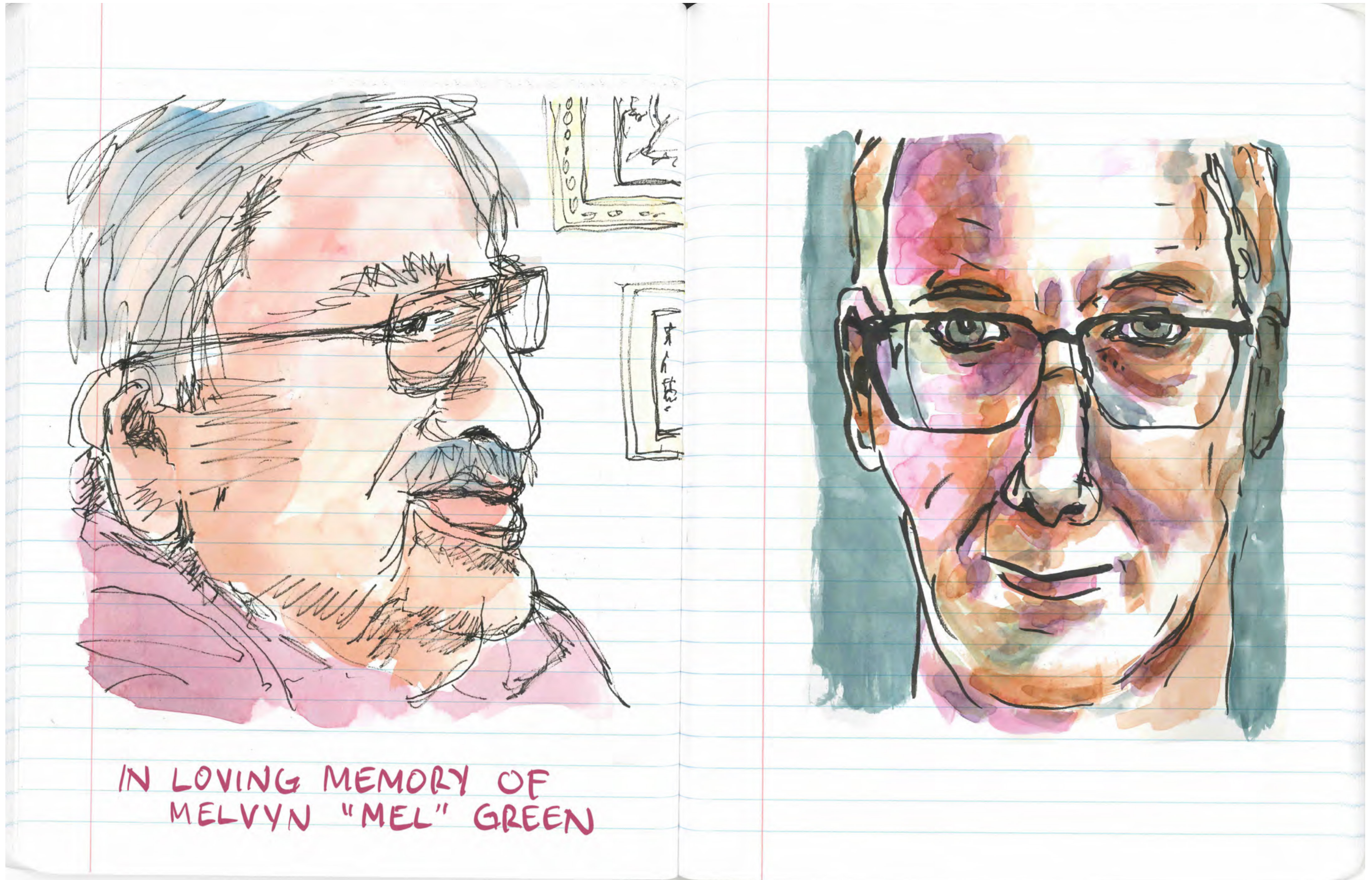
WAY TO PROCEED MADE THE PROCESS COMPLICATED AND EMOTIONALLY-LADEN. WHEN THE POWER DYNAMICS OF A SECOND MARRIAGE AND STRONG-WILLED ADULT CHILDREN ARE LAYERED ON TOP OF THIS, IT'S NOT SUPRISING THAT CONFLICTS EMERGED.



THE PHONE CALL







IN LOVING MEMORY OF
MELVYN "MEL" GREEN