

*relationships*

# THE STONE BEACH

My mother's final resting place needed to be perfect, and I made sure that it was

by Scott Gerace | Saturday, May 13, 2017



I'm the first to admit that I like a few cocktails, even one too many on occasion. That all changed the year my mother, Sally, passed away after a brief battle with lymphoma.

She suffered from back pain one summer. It started on her annual trip to the beach, the one place she dreamed of living all her life. By August undiscovered cancer gripped her spine like a vise. She awoke one night unable to walk, crawling to the phone to call my brother. He arrived to find her sitting at the bottom of the staircase waiting patiently for him and the EMTs, having scooted on her behind like we did as children. By October she closed her eyes forever and floated away.

It was the loss of a best friend I didn't know I'd had.

Sally wasn't exactly Carol Brady. My siblings and I began addressing our mother by her first name, often in response to something dramatic she said or did. She was opinionated and loud but still Miss Popular. If friends wanted to go shopping all day, she was in. Summer days at the local pool? Sally's chair position dictated where the ladies sat. Hungry for ice cream? She commanded you drive her to get a sundae that she was doomed to wear down her white blouse.

When the Bigfoot movies of the 1970s elicited screams of "Mom" from my 7-year-old frightened self, Sally shuffled down the dark hall of our three-story row home and curled up next to me in my twin bed. She stayed with me until I drifted off and forgot all about the creature I imagined lurking in our backyard.

By the time I was in my 40s, we watched true crime shows—her favorite.

"I'm going to make us a few cookies as a treat," she announced during a commercial break, and shortly thereafter a small plate of chocolate chip cookies magically appeared, along with a big scoop of ice cream.

Without her, I suddenly lost my daily phone-a-friend.

Failed efforts to find a therapist with availability through my Employee Assistance Program, prompted me to spend nights enjoying libations at the local watering holes of my Manhattan neighborhood. Alcohol fueled my anger and loss, coupled with a sudden disdain for God and the church back in my Pennsylvania hometown.

It seemed my parents originally purchased two cemetery plots. When our grandmother, Mom-Mom, died, our parents surrendered one to her and hastily snatched up another so they'd still have two more for themselves in the same row.

My mother had one job for her own mother's burial: include the statue of the Blessed Mother in the casket.

"I didn't put the statue in with her," said Sally on the day of my grandmother's funeral. "I added the Camels, but I forgot the most important part."

Mom-Mom apparently needed cigarettes for all eternity, not the Blessed Mother. Wracked with guilt, my mother had the Blessed Mother carved on the gray stone of my grandmother's flat marker.

A few years later, my father succumbed to a brain tumor and was laid to rest next to Mom-Mom with another flat marker, this one brushed bronze compliments of the U.S. Navy. It would be another 15 years before my mother needed her spot in the line.

"We want more than a simple plaque in the ground," suggested my sister, as we sat at the funeral home discussing our mother's tombstone plans.

"Yes, something special for her," I added.

We scoured the pages of headstone options to no avail until ...

"Oh my God, that's it," my sister gasped.

There in those pages was Sally's forever place: a basic shoreline with waves spilling onto the beach as a bright sun glimmered in the background.

"The issue," the funeral director explained, "is when your parents purchased these plots, it was in a row where only flat headstones are allowed."

We would need to contact Jane at the church rectory to plead our case.

And I did. Countless times.

"Hi, Jane, it's Scott Gerace again. I'm Sally Gerace's son." It was as if Sally was still alive and I was calling to see if she would come to the phone.

"Yes, Scott," the 80-year-old Jane replied each time before she explained that the current monsignor was still not feeling well enough to address my special request. She always reiterated sternly, "Your parents knew what they were purchasing, and that row does not allow for a semi-raised stone."

My parents had bought the lemon of burial plots.

I became obsessed. On my frequent trips back to Pennsylvania, I surveyed other graves in the immediate vicinity and measured the space repeatedly. I woke up most nights, unable to sleep, oceans of tears flooding my dreams.

"The church is evil," I drunkenly described to friends, like a salty sailor ranting at the local tavern.

"God hates us," Sally often said after my father died. I was starting to agree with that theory.

"How can you and the church be so cruel!" I shouted through the phone at Jane after months of no response. I'd hit the shores of my grief and the floodgates were open. I sobbed uncontrollably as I paved my way to hell with pointed remarks. I wanted our beach headstone. It was a wish worthy of a battle with God.

"Write a letter to the monsignor and describe what it is you want," she relented. "I can't guarantee he'll do anything." She threw me a life preserver.

In four tight paragraphs, I made my argument. We understood the restriction. A slightly raised 24-inch slant grave marker was ideal as it would be more easily seen and not subjected to as much overgrowth. We loved our mother very much and the approval would be an incredible gift to us.

My drinking reached a crest one weekend afternoon, compounded by my listening to the last saved voicemails from my mother. I stumbled into my favorite diner to order food and woke up on a stretcher, wheeled past patrons chomping on greasy burgers and club sandwiches. I cried on the street and on the trip to the hospital where I spent the night being revived by bags of fluids and the kind words of nurses who listened to my tearful apologies and explanations.

Weeks later, Jane, with failing eyesight, proudly showed me the cemetery blueprints and the ancient card catalog, which included a faded yellow index card my parents signed when they purchased their lemon plots in the row of flat markers. I wouldn't back down until she ushered me up a small elevator into the priests' residence, clutching my carefully constructed letter containing the one wish I had left for my dead mother.

Sitting in a wheelchair, sat my savior: Father Connelly, who recently had a foot amputated. God, how was I to beat that in my argument?

"I understand, Scott," he said. "Let me see your letter."

I stood firm over this ailing priest, passing him the love letter on behalf of my mother.

"We'll see what we can do," he added.

That was it! There was no fire and brimstone. I hadn't been swallowed up into the bowels of hell. With one short elevator ride and a priest's promise, I finally floated back up to the surface for air, leaving behind a monsoon season of martinis below.

Almost a year later, the dusty rose-colored beach sat atop a sloped hillside in Pennsylvania. The waves, carved in white, spilled onto the shore and revealed my mother's name and her time on earth: Sally Ann Gerace, 1943-2013. "I could be at the beach forever," she often said. On the stone, the beach seems lifeless, forever frozen under its rays of white etched sunshine.

I was pulled back to life by my battle for that beach. Even as a lapsed Catholic, I now sat in church some Saturday nights, half listening, and often wondering if God had a hand in giving me peace. I also still loved my martinis, only now sans olives to avoid triggering the memories of my ER trip and the lost voicemails of my mother.

Recently, as I approached my mother's headstone, I spotted tiny little shapes dotting and tracing her grave and also the flat markers of my father and grandmother. Seashells and a beach pail decorated the area, courtesy of my young niece and nephew.

Life.

My mother may be gone, but on that quiet hillside she too is found amidst the sound of crashing waves and the smell of the ocean. Sally would love that.