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Memories of Mother, Gone Too Soon

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Last Wednesday the phone rang; it was the social worker at the nursing home. She told me Mother was becoming more combative and presented a litany of offenses. Mother pushed a resident because she thought she was going to take her stuffed kitty. She mistook another resident for one of her own misbehaving children and tried to spank her. The resident's family was naturally upset and Mother will be moved to another room. Another medical and psychiatric evaluation was scheduled for next week. The social worker informed me that a behavior journal will be kept to see if Mother can stay in the facility. If there is more trouble, she will have to leave. I felt like a parent called by the principal because my child was about to be expelled from school.

How did it come to this? Mother, a paragon of propriety and good taste, is now resorting to physical force. Always fashion conscious and elegant, she now wears outlandishly mismatched attire that belongs to whatever confused resident last rifled through her clothes. The telltale contour of diapers is evident as she walks. For years fiercely independent, she can no longer dress, feed or bathe herself. Known for her calm head in a crisis, constant agitation makes a peaceful existence impossible. Once an avid reader and chairwoman of the library board, Mother can no longer speak, read or comprehend language. Her face is expressionless and her eyes vacant.

For years Mother was a busy homemaker whose primary focus was taking care of her family. Now our roles are completely reversed. My brother, sister and I make sure she has the care she needs--calling doctors, filing insurance, keeping clothes washed, etc. while she plays with stuffed animals and colors in a tattered coloring book. We are now the parents and she is a helpless child.

In my early years, Mother was always emotionally cautious and controlled. Saying "I love you" or giving hugs were deemed uncomfortable and unnecessary. Emotional displays were generally considered a weakness and a waste of time. Anyone guilty of such self indulgence would receive Mother's signature look of annoyance accompanied by a terse "Just take a deep breath and move on". I cringed each time I heard those words. Navigating the bumpy road of childhood just seemed to require more than a deep breath.

But when Mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, everything suddenly changed. She knew exactly what the future held because her mother and sister died a prolonged death with the same illness.

Never one to falter in the face of challenging circumstances, she approached the illness with the same need for order and organization that had always been her trademark. Knowing there was work to be done during the precious lucid time remaining, Mother rolled up her sleeves and began tying up loose ends. She made family albums for each of her children captioned with information she knew would soon be irretrievable. Hours were spent writing vignettes describing the childhood history she never shared. She talked about family history and family secrets, wanting to set the record straight. And inexplicably, with an Exacto knife and the precision of a surgeon, she removed my ex-husband from every family picture—an empowering, symbolic gesture that allowed her a final opportunity to prune the family tree. Uncharacteristically, Mother leaned into her feelings of sadness and loss in the time that remained. She gave me the hugs I yearned for in my childhood, told me she loved me over and over and said her good-byes. And then, seemingly in an instant, she was gone. Like a thief, Alzheimer’s pilfered her faculties, her very essence, before I was through needing her as a parent.

Now I visit her each week at the nursing home. She sits in a wheelchair staring endlessly into space, imprisoned in the deep, black hole of dementia. Her brain is so ravaged that she doesn’t know who I am and I don’t know who she is. How do you relate to someone you love when no one is home? Grieving such a confusing loss defies explanation. There is no closure, only a long, excruciatingly painful good-bye.

Last Sunday was Mother’s Day. In the small country church where I attend, some of the ladies took their places in the pews with beautiful red and white corsages pinned to their shoulders and handbags—a seemingly outdated southern custom where one wears a red flower to honor a living parent or a white flower for a parent who has passed away.

It was the first Mother’s Day since being permanently deleted from my mother’s memory. In her shrinking, confused world, it is now as though I never existed—I am just another stranger. Never again will I hear her call my name or tell me she loves me. So what is the right flower for someone in my circumstances? Red for the living or white for the passing of a mind, the cruel casualty of a relentless, uncontrollable illness.

When I returned home after church last Sunday, my husband greeted me with a bouquet of mountain laurel he picked while on a walk. The beautiful white flowers laced with soft red were in full bloom and the aroma was sweet. As he put them in a glass on the dining room table, I recalled Mother’s love of wild flowers, especially this one. Maybe she would consider these the perfect flower for this Mother’s Day. Splashes of red representing a life and legacy that will continue to live on in her children; white as reminder that Mother would insist that all who love and grieve for her—“just take a deep breath and move on.”