

My Mother's Gift

By: Donna Yates-Adelman

One afternoon, several years after my mother had embarked upon her immutable passage into dementia, she appeared at the kitchen door as I peeled potatoes for dinner. “I have something I want to tell you,” she said.

I turned to face her.

“I want you to always remember how I loved you,” she smiled but her eyes remained steady on mine. “I want you to remember ... after. It's strange, but after someone dear to us is gone, we seem to dwell on the things we wished we hadn't said or done. What I'm saying, dear, is that I want you to promise me that you will remember how I loved you—so very much. And that I know how much you have loved me.”

Mom had begun to forget, little things at first, like appointments and where she placed her keys. But it progressed until finally she agreed to *try* a seniors' residence. For a few months, she seemed happy, though she did spend every weekend with us.

Gradually the weekends increased to three days, four, five. Then early one morning I got a call. “Please come and get your mother. “She spent the night shouting out her window for help. We can't look after her any more.”

Even when I was a child, my mother had worried about ending her days alone in a mental fog. When I was a teenager, I would tell her, “Don't worry, Mom. If that ever happens and Daddy's gone, I'll take you to live with me.” And I would joke that I would be married then, but I would always want to live with her. Actually, I couldn't imagine ever *not* living with her .

So we packed up Mom's belongings, reduced from a four-bedroom home to just a few boxes, and stored them in our basement.

Although recipes had slipped from her memory long ago, Mom still enjoyed the things she could still do fairly easily—helping with the cleaning, working in the garden. And in the fall, we pickled and made jam together. In the spring, we made maple syrup. With a scarf tied round her head and our two farm dogs at her feet, Mom sat by the fire in the driveway, stoking it from a mountain of firewood at her back.

Time moved on and Mom fell further behind. One morning, I awoke to find myself as her mother.

On the day she crawled over the safety gate I put up to prevent her from going down the stairs at night, I knew it was time.

It took a few weeks for Mom—and me—to adjust to the nursing home. I felt guilty when I wasn't with her and she would pace the hall near the front door waiting for me.

Often I would take her for a drive. By the autumn of her last year, she'd stiffened and weakened so that she was unable to step up into the car any more. I'd lift her feather-light frame into the front seat, fasten her seatbelt and we'd be off for ice cream—her favourite food. Even in the middle of winter we'd sit in the car with the heater running full-tilt, licking the dripping cones, the only thing she could still enjoy—until one day she dumped the cone upside down and tried to shake out the ball of ice cream—she couldn't remember what it was or how to eat it.

Little by little, Mom's motor and cognitive skills disappeared like her possessions, and she was reduced to just a shell holding what was left of a life. Odd

familiarity struck me in fleeting moments—her sudden little laugh, or when the sun shone on her face and captured the beautiful blue of her eyes. Although I searched, longingly, I could not find my mother behind those blue eyes.

Every day I would go and feed her and say “Hi, Mom,” and she would answer, “Hello, dear,” and so would three other women in the room.

By early spring I was buying adult diapers, baby food, and liquid meal replacement. I watched my mother waste away and curl up into a fixed, unalterable fetal position. She didn’t know me at all, couldn’t even parrot, “Hello, dear.”

“God spare me from losing my mind,” she’d always said. But once the tangles began creeping through her brain like an octopus paralyzing its prey, she was doomed. The end of her life unfolded just as she’d feared.

Then Mom got pneumonia, what medicine calls, ‘an old person’s friend.’

I had a lifetime of wonderfully happy memories with Mom but it’s hard not to dwell on those few unpleasant moments. Then I remember her words that day when she stood at the kitchen door, “Promise me that you will remember only this—how I loved you—so very much. And that I know how much you have loved me.”

I think of my mother every day. Most of the time, they’re good memories that pop up in a flash while I’m making jam or when I glance at her favorite little figurine.

I thank her for her wisdom and her honesty, for her friendship and her unflinching life-long wish for my happiness. I only hope I will be able to remember, when the time comes, to tell my loved ones the same. But in case I can’t, I’m going to tell them now.