

MY MOTHER'S HANDS

By: Donna Yates-Adelman

I carry three snapshots in my heart, of my life with my mother as she fought her six-year battle with dementia from Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and Lewy Body Disease.

CLICK:

My mother is in her room at the senior's home sitting on her bed, waiting. She looks up at me and smiles ... an embarrassed smile. "Hello, dear."

"Hi, Mom," I say folding her in my arms. "I'm taking you home with me. Everything's okay."

We drive out to our farm, Mom aware of how confused and suddenly paranoid she'd become in the dark of night, shouting out her window for help.

At this exact moment, I feel the shift—I am now my mother's mother.

CLICK:

"Oh, God. What will become of me?" she sobs.

I arrive at our guest room, now Mom's room. Her door is ajar. I peer through the narrow crack to see Mom kneeling by the side of her bed. She raises her tear-streaked face to the picture of Christ above her bed. The early morning light casts a soft glow across her wrinkled face and catches the deep blue of her troubled eyes.

"What! What will become of me?"

CLICK:

Mom is standing beside the front door of the nursing home, waiting for me.

I ascend the steps, she suddenly sees me, smiles and opens her arms to me. She feels like a little bird in my arms. “I’m taking you for lunch, Mom,” I say. “What would you like to eat?”

“Chicken.” She always says chicken.

I lift her feather-light-frame up into the car, buckle her in and we’re off. She lifts her hand to her head. “Some ... thing ... wrong,” she says, with difficulty.

“I know, Mom,” I say. “The doctor will change your medication ... maybe that will help.”

“Can’t ... help ... can’t ... help.”

“Maybe not,” I say. “We’ll pray. But whatever is ahead, I want you to know that I’ll never leave you, Mom. I will always take care of you.”

She turns and looks intensely but lovingly into my eyes. “I know you will, dear. I know you will.” She speaks this with surprising clarity.

We go to St. Hubert Bar-B-Q, we always do. I link my arm in hers and sort of pull her along because she’s lost the ability to walk forward by herself. Patti, our waitress, knows without asking what Mom wants to eat—a quarter breast, fries and ginger ale, tea and vanilla ice cream.

As we wait, Mom picks up her knife and fork and begins to cut the picture of the chicken on the place mat before her. I gently take the utensils and place them out of her reach. I hold her hands in mine and study each engorged vein, each knuckle, each well-worn crease. These are the caring hands that brushed ringlets into my unruly hair every

morning before I went to school, they gently stroked my fevered brow and cooked my meals, they bathed me, cuddled me, tickled me, they washed my clothes and picked me up when I fell. And these well-worn hands wrote me loving letters. I link my fingers in hers and I feel the shift of love's tasks—my mother's caring hands are now mine.

Looking back over those difficult years, I realize that nothing could have prepared me for my mother's shocking losses, though as a nurse I had an understanding of how to care for patients with dementia.

Yet it was my mother who taught *me* about dementia. She taught me to approach her exactly on her own terms. To be aware of what the disease was doing to her and to respond to her and to the disease with a loving response.

As the child-mother, mother-child identities became blurred, reversed and even sometimes jagged, I had to constantly remind myself it was the disease reacting, not my mother. I found that diverting her attention, as one does with a child, often prevented a difficult situation.

But with a child there is a goal. We know the child will progress daily and eventually achieve independence—our input is validated. I knew that at the end of my mother's journey the only reward, painful as it is, would be death.

Setting limits on what we do for our loved one is a difficult and soul-searching process: we must weigh a disproportionate ratio of input, against a diminishing return. Although I tried to balance the quality of time I spent with Mom and her increasing need for physical care as the disease progressed, I made sure that I never sacrificed precious time with my family.

Friends and family tried to help by suggesting that I didn't have to visit my mother most days of the week. But I *wanted* to be with my mother. I didn't want her to be alone. I needed to know she was comfortable.

When my mother could enjoy a meal, we went out for chicken. When she could no longer walk, we took a drive in the dead of winter with the heat cranked up and the windows fogged and we licked ice cream cones. And when all my mother could do was stare off into the distance, I sat beside her and held her loving hands.

My reward was never having to look back and say, "I wish I would have..."