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Alzheimer's Daughter

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ALZHEIMER'S DAUGHTER

My mother has taken to calling me her mother. “My mother handles those things,” she tells the receptionist at the retina specialist’s office when asked to schedule her next appointment. “My mother is going to pay,” she tells cashiers. When asked her age, she’ll look at me, shrug, and tell the inquirer, “Ask my mother.” And once, when I couldn’t attend a performance at her senior residence, she told me, trying—I am certain—to evoke guilt, “All the other parents are coming.”

I know she knows I am not her mother. Her form of Alzheimer’s has manifested itself, primarily, in being unable to access the right words or numbers, in forgetting addition and subtraction. Besides, she never used the possessive adjective with her own mother. Never “Ask my mother,” always “Ask Mother.” So her calling me mother is reassuring. It shows that she can come reasonably close to connecting the appropriate label. Even more importantly, her use of the word—whether conscious or not—recognizes how our roles have shifted.

For most of our lives, we hear how our roles will reverse, but like many true sayings that turn into clichés from overuse we have no idea how overwhelming the reversal can be until it happens, particularly when a parent has Alzheimer’s.

It has been about eighteen months since I moved my mother from Ohio to Chicago where I live and where she lived from early childhood until her family moved to Evanston, and she later left for college. About ten years since her diagnosis. And three years since my father died (the main reason she needed to relocate). The disease’s progression seems remarkably slow when compared to her own mother’s case of dementia; perhaps I am remembering incorrectly because the image of my grandmother sitting, silently staring ahead—unable to speak but still mimicking the gesture of smoking a cigarette—is so profoundly etched in my brain that it dominates other memories. Regardless, my mother’s deterioration is evident. To some degree, she has most of the symptoms on the Alzheimer’s Association’s list of ten stages. I see her wavering between the woman she

used to be, a teenager and an adolescent. At times, she even seems like a very young child.

Before she moved into the senior residence, I prepared her new apartment for her while my brother took her on a vacation to Montana, where he lives. (They stopped at tourist sites, like Mount Rushmore, on the way. The photos of them look a little like those from a wacky honeymoon.) I felt like I was preparing a dorm room for a teenager entering college or helping Marlo Thomas decorate her first apartment on *That Girl*. The feeling persisted. When my mother arrived, I was as anxious as if she was about to pledge a sorority; I had heard that people with severe handicaps are sometimes ostracized by others in senior homes. (Though my mother belonged to a sorority-type club in high school, she and my father were politically opposed to any clubs that could “blackball” perspective members; they chose Oberlin College partly because it did not sanction such organizations). I did not want her blackballed. I ate with her in the dining hall the first night, trying to look inviting. In the weeks after that, she seemed to find her way. Now she has three companions she eats with regularly. Her success is based largely, I suspect, on the same superficial attributes girls use to get into sororities: her looks—117 pounds, amazing cheekbones, cornflower blue eyes, perfect posture, good clothing and a ready smile. She is one of the few in her new home not using a walker. She is still exceedingly “cute.” People actually stop her on the street to tell her so. And once, a kitchen staffer came out at breakfast to announce to her table of six that the kitchen had voted mother the most attractive woman living in the facility. My mother, still socially aware and crafty despite her other deficits, suspected that the vote was taken more to put another woman at the table in her place, then to compliment her.

What interests me most about my mother’s new self is what I didn’t expect, the things that go counter to conventional beliefs about Alzheimer’s. Movies about Alzheimer’s show suffers getting lost. Place disorientation is fourth on the AA list of ten stages: “Sometimes they may forget where they are or how they got there.” My mother still goes for long walks by herself and finds her way home. The AA warns of mood changes: “[Suffers] can become confused, suspicious, depressed, fearful or anxious.” Like her own mother, my mother was always critical or judgmental and somewhat suspicious. When I was young she was private to a fault, frequently aloof (sometimes cold), even secretive, but sure of herself, confident in her intellect and ability as an artist. She is

less critical now, more forgiving and more consistently upbeat—and more open. In fact, the mysteries that have always surrounded her seem to be unraveling. Now, though seldom able to find the correct word for her ear, nose or mouth, she occasionally reveals intimate stories from the past in minute detail, filling in holes I have wondered about my entire life. Sometimes, like with the mustard magnate story, she tells the stories in stages.

I first heard about the mustard magnate (who I'll call MM) when I was in high school, though I didn't know he was a mustard magnate then. She told me the story of him when a boyfriend dropped me. She described MM as a slightly older boy she loved who had gone away to the war but didn't call her when he returned. She said that upon his return she spotted him across a huge sock bin in Marshall Field's. Over the socks, he looked her right in the eye and then walked away, with no acknowledgement. Her pretense for telling the story was to assure me that I would recover from being dumped. But I could tell from the way she recited the story—staring off into the distance—that she had not gotten over the boy and liked having an excuse to talk about him.

It was such a mystery why he left me, said my mother. I never knew why.

At various times over the years, I heard about this boy, but not until she returned to Chicago at age 80 did I learn they had gotten back together briefly. On a spring day last year as we were leaving the Chicago Art Institute, my mother told me that she and MM had taken painting classes together at the CAI on summer college breaks. After class, they went to the lake or to little jazz joints and drank beer. She told me about this reconnection three or four more times—when I took her out to lunch, when I visited her at her apartment—mentioning his intelligence, his wealth, his Judaism, their kindred spirits, how they could talk and talk and talk.

"Hmm," I said after one such recollection. "And you never asked him why he didn't call when he returned from the war?"

"Well," her eyes darted away, like a person about to tell a lie or test a truth. "I think someone might have told him I went out with a friend of his while he was in the war. It wasn't true." She paused. "Well, we went out, but just as friends."

I was floored. How could she talk of this person's desertion for close to forty years and omit this detail. I took the revelation as a confession she had been waiting a lifetime to make. The moment was an epiphany

for me, a moment when I learned one of the secrets of my mother's character, what had made my mother into the woman she had become. A secret she had kept from herself—how she had lost a great love by betraying him. Even, maybe, one of the reasons why she was attracted to my father, another dark-haired man of Jewish descent.

The conversations about MM continued. In fact, during her first year back in Chicago was when I learned he was an heir to a mustard empire. My mother remembered this detail and his first name, but not his last. I went to the grocery store and examined all the mustards until I found one headquartered in Chicago. When I told my mother the name, she said, "Yes, that's him!" My mother wondered if he still lived in the area, assuming that because of the mustard empire he did. He was one of the few people from the distant past whom she said she would like to see. I looked him up online, read quite a bit about the mustard industry (Canada is the biggest producer of mustard seeds), learned what innovations MM had made to the family business, and eventually found his obituary. He had died the year before my mother moved back to Chicago. The headline said something to the effect of *MUSTARD MAGNATE, ARTIST, DIES*. I debated whether or not to tell my mother of his death. I didn't want to make her any sadder than she already became when she talked about MM. Finally I decided that if our roles were reversed, I would want to know.

I told her as she sat on her couch. After delivering the news, I handed her a copy of the obituary. She read the headlines, moving her lips like a child. I braced for her sadness. Instead, she snorted derisively.

"So, he still called himself an artist. Ha!" My old sardonic, critical mother was back.

Most people experience prescient personal moments—when they know they are going to marry the men they are dating or leave the men they are married to—more frequently than their perceptions prove true. The end of the MM story seems to fit this category. I thought by bringing my mother this information, we would share a moment of intimacy; I would see a deeper, tender side that I had sometimes experienced in my youth, albeit infrequently.

She never mentioned MM again unless I asked.

New information she revealed about her courtship with my father proved equally unsettling. The family mythology surrounding my parents' first

meeting and the evolution of their relationship had been consistent throughout my life. They met in college at a card game when a fourth was needed for Bridge. My father, a star athlete, recently back from the war, was smart, athletic and handsome with a thick head of curly black hair. My mother was younger, a platinum blond, who swept him off his feet. They fell in love, got married immediately after college graduation despite my mother's parents' opposition (reportedly because he had a Jewish name, though his family didn't practice Judaism). My older sister was born about ten months later. Forever after they were happy, happier than most of my friends' parents. This last part I know to be true because I witnessed it. They rarely fought. They held hands into their seventies. They had cocktail hour together every night. They supported each other in everything either of them did or wanted—my father was the biggest fan of my mother's art, and my mother followed my father through a series of job changes and moves, always believing in him and never complaining, despite the upheavals.

Until last spring, when we attended the 50th anniversary of my mother's younger sister and husband in D.C., that was the only story I knew. During the trip, we made a side excursion to see Woodrow Wilson's house. My husband and mother walked ahead of my aunt and me down the blossom-festooned streets of Washington, my mother chattering about my father, talking about how her mother had refused to help her plan her wedding so she had done it all herself. I casually mentioned my grandmother's disapproval of his Judaism to my aunt who said, "That wasn't why she disapproved. It was because of all the ups and downs in the relationship."

Ups and downs?

We had arrived at Wilson's former residence, so I didn't have a chance to pursue the subject with my aunt. I assumed she might, in part, be covering for her mother's anti-Semitism. I knew my maternal grandparents were conservative; my grandfather was the managing editor of *The Chicago Tribune* during its heyday. After the weekend, my aunt's remark occasionally flashed across my brain, but never lodged there for long until a recent visit to my mother's retina specialist. We sat in a darkened room waiting for her right eye to adjust to numbing drops. Except for a tiny bright light that vaguely illuminated my mother from behind, the room was black. We do this about once a month, alternating eyes. Once the eye is anesthetized, the physician pulls back the upper and lower lids

and holds them in place with a small metal contraption that makes the bed of her eye an unblinking target. (My niece, Wendy, who has taken my mother for this procedure, compares it to scenes from *Clockwork Orange*.) The doctor injects her eye with Lecentis, a protein that promotes the growth of new blood vessels to replace the ones that are bursting and flooding her eyes due to macular degeneration. My mother is usually in pain for a few days afterward. Yet at that moment she waited calmly, talking of my father. Out of nowhere, she mentioned his first fiancée.

I had always assumed this engagement ended before my parents met. But as my mother talked, it became clear that was not the case. My mother said she and other girls would go to the movies with my father, as friends, because his fiancée had already graduated and moved home to live with her parents. Some weekends, his fiancée drove to Oberlin to visit him or he went to see her. I remembered a box of old photos where I found a shot of her: a glamorous woman with jet black hair in a black bathing suit. I remembered my father ignoring me when I asked him why they ended their engagement. I later asked my mother why he would not answer me. She said, with a sneer, "No doubt because of how you phrased the question," and then, she refused to tell me either, saying it was private.

In the retina specialist's office, my mother said that the fiancée mysteriously dropped my father. He was brokenhearted. Later he and my mother began dating. But months (did she say a year?) into my parents' relationship, the woman showed up, wanted my father back, and he dropped my mother.

"It was the worst thing, the worst thing that ever happened to me," said my mother, her head backlit by the small white light, creating a nimbus around her now soft white hair. I asked her what happened next and she said, "Oh, eventually, she broke up with him again. Her mother didn't like that he was Jewish."

Was this one of the reasons my mother was so protective of herself? I found myself experiencing an intimacy with her that I had longed for as a child, had even tried for recently. It now felt burdensome. These moments usually trigger the memory of the time she took my sister on the rapid transit to downtown Cleveland for lunch and shopping. They both wore white gloves. The train terminated in the appropriately named Terminal Tower, the Empire State Building of my youth. *I'll take you*

when you're older, my mother had said. That “older” has only recently arrived.

When my mother first relocated to Chicago, friends helped me with her. Some still do. My son sometimes visited her. And until Wendy got a full-time job, she helped out a great deal. My aunt, brother and sister all visit a few times a year, though they live in other states. My brother and my aunt have her to visit. My brother calls her regularly. My sister has agreed to call more often, writing it on her calendar so she doesn't forget. And Chloe, the daughter of a childhood friend, now going to college in Chicago, is paid from my mother's trust to take her for walks and write letters for her. Still, my mother feels like my sole responsibility. I pay her bills, conduct all her financial business, do her grocery shopping, collect her dry cleaning, arrange her schedule with outside care, escort her to doctor appointments, include her for holidays and take her most places she needs to go.

In most respects, I am her mother.

Last fall, I took her to her Evanston High School Reunion. First I drove to the home of an old friend of my mother's who I had never met. She still lived by herself in a large house on a tree-lined street near Northwestern University. That friend took her to the luncheon of a girls' club from high school. At five, I drove back from the city to take them to the dinner at a country club. First cocktails with about fifty or sixty 81-year-olds—given they all graduated the same year, they had to be pretty close in age—and a few younger wives and me, the only grown-up child in attendance. This was to be their last official reunion. Though it was an odd year, their 63rd reunion I believe, they didn't want to wait until the 65th, reasoning that there would be too few of them left. My mother was one of the younger-looking women, though also one of the less lucid. Still, she managed to smile, laugh, and nod at the appropriate moments. (I had more difficulty.)

At dinner, I thought the evening might improve. A table of five friends of over sixty years at their last meeting had to be bittersweet and moving, right? Wrong. What did they talk about? The square footage of their retirement units. The means of transportation they had taken to get to the reunion. The weather.

The end, I learned, is profoundly unceremonious.

After dessert, the women from my mother's club gathered to take photos. They posed, rearranged themselves, and posed again. I marveled

at how they could take so many photos that surely would never make it into anyone's album. Finally, I decided I had to get my mother home. (Her old friend had a ride with someone else.) When I tried to interrupt the assemblage discreetly, my mother resisted—though I admit, rather gaily—announcing loudly, “My mother is trying to make me go home.”

Her friends looked at her in horror. She assumed their reaction was because she wasn't allowed to stay as late as everyone else. I tried to cover, using a tone as gay as hers, “Mother, we need to get going. We have a long drive back to the city.”

My mother sighed, an exaggerated stage sigh, thinking she was speaking to sympathizers and said, “My mother isn't going to let me stay.” I felt a stab in my chest, a strange paradox of pity for myself because I had given of my time and was not being appreciated, and sadness for my mother that she had revealed her deterioration to her friends, that their last view of her would be as a delusional old woman. At least she didn't know. On the way home, she talked about how her old friend had never really been accepted, how happy she must have been to go to the dinner with us, and how one of the men at our dinner table still had a crush on her. Her confidence was as strong as ever.

The first boy my mother ever kissed was MM. Sometimes when there is a lull in the conversation or when she forgets what she was going to say mid-sentence, I ask her about that kiss. Her eyes always light up. She never forgets how to tell that story.

I just learned that the first boy I ever kissed died recently. Scrappy Denzel Lee from down the street. His family lived near the boxy brick school, Oviatt Elementary, where I attended fourth and fifth grade. The memory of the kiss is so hazy, as if seen through gauze, that I would say I imagined it—him rising from crossed knees onto all fours to stretch across the circle of children around the spinning bottle, smiling in a loopy way, his wrists sunk in the long, yellowing grass, to kiss me on the lips—if not for my sister remembering it as well. He had brilliant blue, blue eyes that looked like many-faceted jewels stuck in pale, freckled skin. The spinning bottleneck had not chosen me. It had pointed to my sister who refused to kiss him. In a mix of pity and attraction for the bad boy (characteristics that have plagued me for most of my life), I volunteered as a substitute.

My first kiss.

I must have continued to see Denzel Lee in the school halls. It was a small town and he lived nearby. But I recall nothing of him from those days. My next image of him is from adulthood, maybe our twenties or early thirties.

I walk in Kepner's, the tavern on Main Street in the middle of the day. The open door illuminates the dark interior, a row of drunk men sitting at the horseshoe bar facing the door. Denzel Lee is among them. The light catches his eyes—like blue Peruzzi-cut diamonds, refracting the summer sun light—provide a startling contrast to his sooty skin, as stained as a coal miner's. He is smiling, that same loopy grin, holding a brown beer bottle. I avoid eye contact. I don't know if he recognizes me. Instead of saying hello, I walk past the bar, up the two or three steps, to the booths in the back. I am meeting friends. Or I am with friends. I can't recall. All that remains from that day is Denzel Lee. What type of work did he do that would coat his face so darkly? Or was the dirt from a solitary project—digging a garden or tarring his drive—that required a beer?

The same day I learned of Denzel Lee's death, I learned that Oviatt Elementary School was being razed. I remembered the playground where the girls with long ponytails played horse, tossing back their bound hair as they cantered around the blacktop. The playground where Michael D told me to "Go F--- a Duck." I told my parents who were outraged. Michael D's mother brought him to apologize: Michael D and his mother on one side of the thin screen door, my mother and I on the other. After he said, "I'm sorry," I said "Oh, that's all right." My mother countered with, "No, it isn't," and went into a haughty rant about how she had thought we lived in a good neighborhood. Very ungracious of her I thought, given he had apologized. Decades later, when she almost side-swipes a car, and mutters "F---" under her breath, I want to remind her of that apology.

Time is crumbling. My mother is lost in its ruins and I feel I am following her.

When old friends of my mother's call looking for her, I feel as if I am a bystander in a Holocaust. These people were going about their lives, making plans, and suddenly their spouses are dead, and friends are dying or being taken away places where they can't be found. Before my mother returned to Chicago, she would often talk of friends being "wrapped up" and "taken off to the mountains" by their children.

“Is this Mary Rosenthal’s daughter?” callers ask. Those who don’t know me have gotten my number from friends of friends. “I’m trying to find Mary. My kids moved me out here to _____ [fill in the blank].”

I’ll provide my mother’s number and say that she loves to hear from old friends even though she might not remember their names. Some callers know my mother has Alzheimer’s; if they don’t, I tell them. I say I can’t give her their phone numbers because she is not capable of calling them. Though she still manages to tap out my number when needed, I have seen her trying to put people’s names or addresses into the phone and wondering why she can’t.

On a morning my mother is scheduled for a dental appointment, there is a blizzard. The snow had been coming down steadily for about two hours when my mother calls in a panic. An inch covers the ground. Six to twelve inches are predicted.

“The weather is horrible, I don’t think I can go outside.”

“Your appointment is in an hour. The storm isn’t supposed to pick up until this afternoon.”

“There’s too much snow.” She says this with the authority of a mother, the authority I have found credible my entire life.

My heart clenches. Coordinating schedules—particularly given how many appointments she has—is mind-boggling. Today, Chloe is taking her, and I won’t even need to go. Who knows if I’ll be able to find another day Chloe is free. I think of all the times in my childhood when I longed for a snow day or to stay home, my begging, and my mother’s firm denial.

“No,” I say firmly. “You have to go today. It’s not a big deal. It is winter in Chicago and it’s only snow.”

Later when I talk to Chloe, she says it went fine. I remind myself that I must keep reminding myself that I cannot trust my mother to make decisions—or advise me on the ones I need to make—even when her voice sounds as firm as it did twenty, thirty, forty years ago. This is a hard tenet to absorb.

Her child-like comments and observations can be clever or amusing. Recently, when we drove by a grove of small leafless trees with orange trunks and yellow branches in Lincoln Park—striking against the white, white snow—I wondered aloud whether it was an art installation. My

mother said, “I asked my mind that very question but no answer came back.”

When she had a bruise on her leg she thought a spider was inside, crawling under her skin.

She calls my cat a “good dog” and calls the squirrels and pigeons in the park “babies.” The vegetables on her plate are little animals. When I give her an aspirin for an eye ache, she looks at me doubtfully and asks how it will get from her mouth to her eye.

Her remarks are not things I can share with my friends the way they shared their children’s cute expressions with me. Most of my friends’ children are considerably younger than my son. They were in college when my son made his cute remarks so I could not share them. I think this is my chance—but I cannot put my mother on the phone with them and say merrily, “Here, Mary wants to talk to you,” the way some of them did just a few years ago with their toddlers. Nor can I scold her when she loses a hearing aid, which costs about the same as a late model used car in good condition.

At a restaurant on a day I take her shopping, she looks around and says, wondrously, almost with awe and appreciation, “I am a completely different person now. I am living a new life as someone else.”

She wants me to share in this awe. She is more inclusive and aware than she was before Alzheimer’s. I remember her working in the kitchen of my adolescence, where she painted portraits of neighborhood children for small commissions before she returned to school, earned her M.F.A., and focused on printmaking and woodcuts and got her own studio. I was not permitted to interrupt unless it was pressing. It barely mattered; she never seemed to hear me. She kept her eyes focused on the canvas or the child posed on the stool. The same was true when she drove the car and I sat next to her or in the back, her eyes on the road. She didn’t hear me. Or when she was cooking dinner, reading a book, working in the garden, sunbathing in the backyard, she responded without looking at me. I often felt invisible. For most of third grade, I thought that I existed in a world of my own, people appeared when I entered a room and disappeared when I left, everyone a figment of my imagination.

Every few weeks, I take my mother to the studio of friends—Tom Bachtell, who draws illustrations for the *New Yorker* and David Cicisko, whose huge bold graphics adorn the Belmont El Stop—where they have

generously invited her to come work for a few hours, to feel as if she is still involved in making art. On the sweeping curve along Lakeshore Drive to their studio in the loop, she asks me, "What's new?" before I can finish she asks again, "So, what's new?" If I manage to answer, she will ask again in a few minutes. I know this is result of her condition yet I feel that it is just a continuation of her not hearing me.

On a day after she receives a particularly brutal eye injection, I take my mother back to her apartment, and fix her a snack while she lies down on the couch. She complains of pain.

"Think of Mexico. Remember the hacienda draped with pink and purple bougainvillea," I say, recalling our long trips there during my youth, the strange lush plants, the intoxicating smells and vibrant colors, all so different from the Midwest, the only landscape I knew at the time. My siblings and I spent most days with Louisa, a nanny hired for our extended stay, while my mother and father had cocktails at the pool.

"That's what you used to tell me when I couldn't sleep," I add.

"Remember Mexico."

"Did I say tell you that?" she asks, smiling and closing her eyes. "I was a good mother, wasn't I?"