

Refreshing a Mother's Memory With Love and Stories

www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/fashion/modern-love-dementia-mother-family-love.html

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January 6, 2017



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My mother is slowly losing her mind. This fact, as well as all the tragic repercussions along the way, takes up a large chunk of my chats with my four sisters — and with many of my friends who are going through similar issues with their parents.

Recently, my mother's geriatric specialist told me there was a significant rise in dementia in those 60 and older (my mother is 81), particularly among women, and no one really knows why. I later joked to one of my sisters that with women having to endure so much injustice throughout their lives, it was perhaps a relief to forget it all.

But that's just me being cynical. This story is not cynical.

I have a large family, and at Thanksgiving, we were 35 sitting around several tables in my mother's dining room, and that didn't even include us all.

My mother once flourished in a crowd, playing the perfect hostess, making every guest feel as if his or her presence was crucial. Nowadays, any gathering beyond her five daughters flusters her and she often retreats to her bedroom. During the Thanksgiving celebration, she pulled me

aside and said with panic: “Jenny, who are all these people and what are they doing in my house? I feel so strange to be here with all these people I don’t know.”

I reassured her that I felt the same way. In truth, I was relieved that she had remembered my name and knew she was in her own house. I live in dread of a day when she won’t. We returned to the party, and I, like a politician’s aide, did what I have become good at — giving her subtle reminders of whom she is talking to, where she is, what day, month, year it is, etc. I also indulge in impatient snaps at her, relying on the high probability that she won’t remember them.

My mother, for her part, is brilliant at faking it. After a lifetime of faking it in all sorts of ways as a mode of resilience, she is still an expert, compensating for her memory loss with skill and grace. The fact that my 85-year-old father and his 92-year-old brother, their minds razor-sharp, were at the Thanksgiving table surrounded by their present wives and their former wives spoke volumes to the expertise women have developed in accommodating men, and indeed, patriarchy.

Early on, my mother was a traditional stay-at-home mom, sewing her daughters’ clothes and overseeing all things domestic, though she harbored a secret desire to be a writer. Like so many women of her generation, instead of pursuing her dream, she married it. Though my father was working at a shipping company then, his literary ambitions were paramount, and he went on to become a professional writer.

After my parents separated in 1969 — I was 7 — my mother began to build a robust business as a portrait and wedding photographer. (She recently told me that although she would have never chosen to get divorced, she was ultimately glad because otherwise she might never have been forced to discover what she was capable of.)

Following her divorce, she became active in the local chapter of the National Organization for Women, was a co-founder of a writers’ collective dedicated to analyzing gender roles in children’s media, and was a co-publisher of two seminal books on sex stereotyping in children’s books and prime-time TV: “Dick and Jane as Victims” and “Channeling Children.”

During my childhood, she was the breadwinner, the working mom, her second husband a stay-at-home dad who brought five children of his own to the ménage. At the time, the domestic arrangement was so unusual that People magazine ran a feature on our family. With my stepfather, she had a fifth daughter, Joan, 11 years my junior.

When we were growing up, our mother radiated ambition, possibility and strength. But above all, she radiated love for us, ultimately pushing us out into the world to shine on our own.

And now, my four sisters and I are terrified of a time when our mother won’t recognize us, and as with the inevitability of the killer’s arrival in a horror film, we know that day is coming. Three days after Thanksgiving, it arrived for my sister Joan.

My mother had gone with Joan to have dinner with her in-laws in Brooklyn. They were sitting next to each other at the table surrounded by others when my mother turned to Joan and said,

“So, remind me, how did we meet?”

Taken aback, Joan replied, “Mom, you gave birth to me.”

“Well, then,” she said hesitantly, “why didn’t I raise you?”

“You did, Mom.” Overwhelmed, Joan excused herself, saying, “Let me get you some water.” Perhaps, Joan hoped, Mom’s lapse was because of too much wine, not enough water.

Often, we sisters console ourselves with the thought about our mother that when the circumstances are right — no alcohol, adequate hydration, a lot of sleep, familiar setting — she does well, her memory nearly intact. During the Thanksgiving holiday, Joan reasoned, Mom had become overtired from having too much family all at once and for too many days.

Joan rose from the table and went into the kitchen, crying. Mom followed. Joan, not wanting Mom to see how upset she was, moved to a bedroom. Mom followed.

“Don’t cry, please,” Mom urged her when they were alone. “Are you crying because you think I don’t love you?”

“No,” Joan said, “I know you love me.”

“Are you crying for me?” Mom asked.

Joan said nothing.

Mom took Joan’s hand and held it tightly. “This is me getting old,” she said. “It is neither easy nor pleasant. But if I can get through this, so can you. Please know that I love you. And brace yourself, because this is who I am now.”

Joan sobbed, her hand still in our mother’s.

“It’s not that I don’t love you,” Mom said. “I love you absolutely. It’s just that you have slipped from my mind. These things happen. And this thing, this thing will happen again and again, but I love you. I love you so much.”

Joan’s tears were by now a torrent. She felt awful for making our mother worry, for making her feel ashamed of her failing mind. “I know you love me, Mom,” she said.

“Honey,” our mother said, “I don’t know your name right now, but you must trust that I will always know exactly who you are. So do this for me: Tell me everything. I want to know every last detail — where you were born, where you went to high school and college, what you do for a living, if you are married. Do you have children? Come back to the table and sit down next to me and tell me all of it.”

Since Joan told me this story, her devastation is also mine, but because it did not happen to me directly, my looming question is like a survivor’s: Why Joan? Why not me?

My sisters and I are so close that I draw great strength from them on an almost daily basis. This gift of unity I attribute to my mother. So why Joan? There are rational explanations, like the fact that Joan lives in Los Angeles, or that — in memory terms — she was the last one in and therefore the first to go. But none of those work for me.

Mom has always had a special love for Joan — not greater, just different. Perhaps that is because she is the youngest, unique in her combination of parents, and as such in a sense an only child, though she has nine siblings. Perhaps it's because she was, and is, a bridge between the two families. Or because as a child she was very serious and always a tad sickly. Or because Joan's father, her primary caretaker, died while she was still in college.

Mom has been profoundly protective of us all, but a little more so of Joan. That Mom managed to muster a magical, mystical self for Joan in that very difficult moment for both of them, that she could speak above and beyond and in spite of memory, that she was able to dig deep and find her brightness — I attribute to her particular love for Joan.

That evening in Brooklyn, Joan did as Mom asked, and recounted her life story.

Our mother could have forgotten any of us, and one day she surely will. But her meta-lucidity amid terrible confusion, driven by powerful love, has given us a way forward. She has affirmed for us the extraordinary power of a mother's love, as if that love were a force, like gravity, governing who we are and how we behave as human beings during our orbit on earth.