

Losing Mom – A Poem in 4 Parts

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First I tried to keep her in the present.

On a chair in my brother's garden
amid our small gathering sits my mother, Shirley,
dressed in the bright pale green of early spring on this mid-August afternoon.
She looks beautiful. She seems happy.
She knows it is her 90th birthday that we are celebrating, and she approves.
She can't think of anything to say. Those days are gone.
She's a little shaky on who we all are. I am worried she is forgetting us.
But here in the garden, looking safe and content,
I believe she knows she belongs to us, and we to her.

I am excited to see her the next afternoon.
In her room at the seniors' residence I plunk down beside her on the bed.
We talk about her birthday celebration. Did you enjoy your party, Mom?
"Party?" Your birthday party at Terry's yesterday. Remember?
In the garden? "Terry's garden," she says. That's right! She smiles.
I name the people that were there. At some of the names, she responds.
Eric. "Eric," she repeats. "Eric was there."
Yes. And Karen. "Oh, yes. Karen was there."
And Terry, of course. "It was in Terry's garden," she says matter-of-factly.
Her responses are both statements and questions at the same time.
Would you like to look at some pictures? "Okay."

The album I made for her 90th birthday is open across our laps,
the album of her family, annotated, a two-page spread for each child and grandchild,
several pages at the end for close friends that are still in touch.
Here you are, Mom, I say. My mother looks at the page,
recent pictures of herself smiling back at her. Do you remember this? I ask.
I point to the picture of her and my dad standing in front of their condo
where she was still living two months ago. "That's me," she says,
pointing to herself. Who's standing with you? I ask. She looks harder.
"That's your dad," she says. I smile and nod. Do you know where that was taken?
"No," she replies. That's the condo building where you lived. "Oh."

I turn the page. Her first-born child. Here's Terry, Mom.
I tap on the picture of Terry with his arm around her, mother and son smiling.
"Oh, Terry. That's Terry?" she says, half asking, half telling.
She touches the picture, her finger sliding over to the picture of herself.
"And that's me," she says with a little more assurance,
but still looking to me for confirmation. Yes that's right, Mom. You and Terry.
And here - I point to the right, tapping the picture I want to draw her attention to -
here's Terry with the twins, Graeme and Len, tap tap.
She looks at me. She's remembering something.
"Didn't Graeme go to Japan?" she asks. Yes, that's right Mom, I say smiling, he did.

I want to elaborate. He taught English there for a couple of years.
"Uh huh," she says. That memory goes no further, but it touches something else.
"Didn't Josh give me that?" she asks, pointing to a carving of a red Chinese dragon.
That's right, Mom. He did. "Umm." I wait, but nothing follows. I return to the album.
And here's Terry with Geoff and Christina, tap tap ...

I tap on each face as I name Terry's grown-up children, her grandchildren,
waiting until I am sure that her eyes have followed my finger.
You took care of them a lot when they were little. Remember?
"Uh huh," she manages, knowing it sounds right but not remembering.
I go on. You made a playroom for them, bought toys from the Amity,
Tinker Toys and puzzles, little matchbox cars, and you painted a track for their cars.
"Did I?" she asks, pleased at this report of her past self.
And here's Terry playing viola in the orchestra, tap tap. She looks.
Terry's kids all play instruments too, I say.
"Oh, that's nice," she says. We are still on Terry's page.

She touches the top picture, the one we looked at first.
"That's me, isn't it?" she asks. Yes. I point. And who's that, Mom?
"I'm not sure." She looks at me a little guiltily. "Terry?"
That's right Mom, it's Terry! She relaxes a little.
"Does he know I'm here?" Yes, Mom, he does. He comes to see you every day.
"No, I don't think so." Yes, Mom, he does. He was here earlier today.
In her eyes, fear, sadness, confusion, irritation, distress. Her eyebrows scrunch down.
"What's wrong with me? Why can't I remember? I must be going nuts!"
No, no. It's okay, Mom. You just forget a little bit sometimes. We all do.
She is not convinced.

Then I tried to reach her through the recent past.

We drive past the condo building where my parents lived.
Lived for eight years after downsizing from the family home,
the two of them together making a sufficiently functioning person
able to live independently, with a little help.
Lived until six months ago. Until the building's automatic door,
failing to sense my father's frail form, closed on him,
causing the fall, the bone fracture, the beginning of the end.
Lived until my mother was alone. Confused. Afraid. Her other half suddenly gone.
Lived until, our hands forced by undeniable circumstance,
we moved her from her home ... to a Home.

Here's the condo building, Mom, where you and Dad lived, I say.
I pull into the parking lot. I point to the tall impersonal structure.
"Oh?" she says, looking vacantly at the building.
Not a glimmer of recognition.
The condo itself is not yet emptied, let alone sold. I have the key.
Come on, I tell her. Let's go inside. "Inside?"
She looks at me, her eyes checking, questioning.
I train my eyes on hers, sure and steady, as called for by the moment.
Yes, I say. We'll go inside. Come on. I get out and walk around the car.
I open her door, my hands outstretched, reaching for her. Waiting.
She understands, raises her arms, and lets me help her out of the car.

Inside, some things are packed up and gone, others still here.
She stands looking around this no-longer-familiar place,
her eyes void of recognition. Come and sit, I suggest.
I help her to the couch. She touches an afghan. Karen made you that, I tell her.
"That's nice." You used to put it over your knees to keep them warm.
"Did I?" she says.
I show her treasures from her flea market days.
A small, fluted vase made of green depression glass from Locke Street.
A hand-painted bowl made in occupied Japan that she bought in Aberfoyle.
"Uh huh," she says,
dutifully looking at each item, acknowledging my efforts.
Her eyes rest on mine. A trace of a self-conscious grin, a hint of recognition,
not of the items, but of the craziness of this interaction.
"I must have liked them," she offers.
I laugh. Yes, I guess you did, Mom.

Freed from my barrage she looks around again. Her eyes lock on the kitchen table.
"He just fell off the chair," she says suddenly. And then, "And I called 911."
She is half asking, half telling. That's right, Mom, you did.
"They were here so fast ... the men ... and then they just took him away.
I don't know what happened to him." She looks at me, confused and anxious.
He died, Mom. "Yes, I guess so. Maybe when his head hit the floor."

I think he died in the chair and that's why he slipped off the chair, I say.
My heart aches at the image.
Do you remember who it was that fell off the chair?
"Hmm." She thinks about it. She's not sure. But she remembers the trauma.

"Where are we going now?" my mother asks as we drive back to the Home.
We're going back to your place, I tell her. Back to Aberdeen. Silence.
We stay quiet for a few minutes. "Is it silly?" she asks. Is what silly?
"A song." I am overjoyed at hearing her initiate a topic. What song, Mom?
"You won't think I'm silly?" No, Mom. What are you thinking of?
There, sitting in the passenger seat, she begins to belt out a song,
in a loud, somewhat hoarse, and shaky, slightly off-key voice,
"God save our gracious Queen." I join in.
"Long live our noble Queen." We are both off key, but happy.
"God save the Queen." We finish the verse and smile at one another.
A throwback from a shared Ontario elementary school ritual,
a generation apart.

Later, my brothers want to know how Mom was today.
She was great, I tell them. Just great.

Then through her more distant past.

My mother is coming to visit for Christmas. Our annual family get-together. Everyone comes, if they can. For four days we eat, drink, sing, play music, and cater to my parents. This year there is just one parent, my mother. Back home, my brother coaxes her into the car, reassures her that she won't be any trouble, fills the rest of the van with offspring and instruments, and heads south. Eight hours later, my mother is coming through my door on the arm of one of her grandsons. Here she is! he says, announcing her arrival for her sake as much as for ours. My mother looks pleased to have arrived somewhere. We envelope her with hugs and kisses and reassurances, and she lets us settle her in.

We are sitting at my kitchen table the next day. She has had her tea. Do you remember this, Mom? I hand her a black-and-white picture taken at the Rock Gardens in the Royal Botanical Gardens. A young girl about fourteen years old in a homemade dress stands beside a middle-aged man wearing a straw hat. "That's me," she says, touching the figure of the girl. Her fingers find the man. "And that's my dad!" Her voice is sure, with a touch of wonder in it. I smile. Yes, that's you and your dad. My grandpa, I add.

Another picture, this one of a small woman sitting straight in a chair in the middle of the back garden on Cumberland Avenue, her hands folded on her lap, her face kind, her mouth smiling. "That's my mother," my mother proclaims, eyes shining, as she looks up at me, looks to me for an answer. A long pause, the question forming, coming... "Where are they now," she asks weakly, "my mom and dad?" They died, Mom. A long time ago. "Did they?" she asks, but it's not really a question.

Later, I show her more photographs pulled from old family albums. I slide each new picture into her hands, on top of the picture before it, and then retrieve the picture underneath. Her hands are clumsy. Her thumbs rub across each image as she tries to take it in. Her mother, her father, herself. She recognizes them. Or at least she recognizes them in these photos, photos she has seen a thousand times before.

She picks up a more recent photo from the scattered pile on the table. "That's me," she says quietly, her finger pressing down on the image of a young woman with long flowing red hair and bright full eyes that look straight into the camera. She looks up, questioning. She's not sure. No, that's not you, Mom. I wait. "You?" she asks, looking up at me. No, Mom, that's Caitlin, my little girl, your granddaughter.

I stand there, between my mother and the image of my daughter,

the link. In my chest, two simultaneous pulls, but they are not in conflict.
"Caitlin," she repeats, still looking at me, then back at the picture.
She recognizes the name. She puts the picture down, looks back up at me.
Silence. "What should I do now?" she asks.

Finally just the joy and sorrow of a fleeting moment shared.

I ask the receptionist for the entry code. My mother lives now on the other side of a locked door with other mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, who can't be trusted not to wander off into unknown peril at a whim. I enter this new facility, at least new to us. My mother's room is at the end of a wide hallway full of wheelchaired residents, waiting. Some of them smile at me, some of them ignore me. One lady shows me her doll. I nod and smile at her, but can't think of anything to say. I have not become an expert in old age. The staff here are so much more jovial than their surroundings. In loud, cheery voices they greet each resident, make small talk that is often not reciprocated, and engage in the task of figuring out what each person wants and needs.

My mother's room has only a few things in it. She no longer has any interest in TV, books, writing letters, or hosting visitors. She no longer reads the newspaper. She takes no interest in sentimental belongings. The familiar pictures on the wall, pictures that have been hanging on walls in her life since she was a girl, are there. We hope she feels their familiarity, but she does not acknowledge them. I walk quietly over to my mother. She is sitting in her wheelchair, dozing. Bending down, I gently rub her forearm until the sensation begins to waken her. She looks at her arm and then at me. I am ready.

Hey there, Mom, I say. My eyes warm, my voice cheery, and my smile beaming. She looks directly into my eyes, then scans my face. I've come to visit, Mom. I'll be here all week, I say. Here, let me turn your chair around and I'll sit on the bed. Slowly I move her chair into position before gently sitting on the bed across from her. I don't want to put her off with any sudden moves. She follows my movements, and the movement of her chair. You look great, Mom, I say, taking both her hands in mine. Her eyebrows move a little, and she nods, still looking at me intently. I lock eyes with her. The feeling rises up through my core - I've lost my guard. A tear starts to roll down my cheek. And then, through my watery eyes, I see a tear forming in the corner of my mother's eye. "Okay?" she asks, her voice hoarse and choppy, her eyebrows arched with concern. I pull myself together. Yes, everything is okay, Mom. Everything is fine. Really. I smile reassuringly. I was just feeling a little sad, I tell her. I love you, I tell her. "I - love - you," she says, emphasizing the *you*.

I talk to her. I tell her who is coming over to see her tonight. "Uh huh." She repeats the names. She is trying so hard for me. I tell her it's snowing. "Uh huh." She doesn't remember what snowing means. Look, Mom, I say. I wheel her over to the large window in her room. Look. It's snowing. See the snow coming down? Her eyes scan the scene outside. "It's snowing," she says. Together we look at the snow falling on the evergreens.

I brought you something. Look. I open up the tin of cookies. Her face brightens. "Oh," she says. Do you want chocolate chip or shortbread, I ask. "Chocolate," she says with no hesitation. Do you like it, I ask while she is eating. "Um," she says,

then “yes” once her mouth is clear. She is looking at the tin of cookies. She has another, and half of another. She indicates that she is done by putting down the uneaten half. Her CD player is on her dresser. I ask if she’d like to hear some music. “Okay,” she says. I put Vera Lynn on, singing songs from WWII. My mother used to sing along. Vera sings, *We’ll meet again. Don’t know where. Don’t know when.* My mother is listening but I can only just barely see a bit of movement. I take her hands. She lets me swing her arms to the music as I sing along. I watch her mouth struggle to formulate the words, but she can’t quite get them out.

At the end of the song, she looks at me with the expectancy of a school girl. “Now what?” say her eyes. I gently let go of her hands, but she grabs on to my left hand and holds it tight in her grip. Mom, it’s okay. I pat the hand holding on to mine. I’m not going anywhere. I was just going to sit on the bed. I point to the bed as I say this. She follows my eyes. I feel her grip loosening. I feel the overwhelming burden of her trust. I’m right here, Mom, I say again. I’m staying until after dinner. I won’t leave without telling you, I promise. A promise I have always kept. She begins to doze in her chair again. Quietly I pull out the book I brought and get myself comfortable on the bed. But instead of reading my book, I watch my mother sleeping, propped up with pillows, a throw over her knees, her mouth slightly open. I listen to her breath, a gentle wheeze on each inhale, a little moan on each exhale.

I watch her sleep with the snow falling on the evergreens in the distance.