

## Caring for Mom

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“I can’t go back there,” I said aloud to the ether, as I ran, bobbed and wove through the people mass on the sidewalk. A left turn at the corner, then twenty more steps and I was at my car. Two seconds later, I sat in the driver’s seat, opened the window and tried to decompress before starting the car. The anger from another time had punched me in the gut. I hate feeling powerless, and worse, I don’t forgive the gross insensitivity of others.

Calm after some deep breathing exercises but still depressed, I decided to get a cup of coffee before going home. I found a small shop that did a robust takeout business with empty tables in the back. I slipped into a chair in the far corner. Within seconds the server came over and placed a menu on the table.

“Coffee, black,” I said as he slid the menu towards me. I pushed it back. “No thanks.” Before he could move, I said, “Wait a minute. Can I get a hot fudge sundae?”

The young man regarded me for a long moment and nodded. “Yes.”

Half way through my coffee he returned, setting the confection on the table in front of me. I stared at it and wondered if I had the energy to eat it.

“Tell me,” he said and sat down.

I stared at him in disbelief. How could he know? “Don’t you have work to do?”

“My shift just ended,” he said. “I’ve no place to be right now.”

I looked at the young man who could have been my grandson. He had a kind face and bright dark brown eyes. For reasons I still don’t understand, I decided to trust him.

“Earlier today, in a conference seminar, the conversation veered toward hospital care.” I looked at him. He’s maybe twenty-two. I shook my head. He’ll never understand.

He reached out and caressed my wrist. “Go on. I’m listening.”

I said, “In this time, the elders in this country are no longer revered or appreciated. There is a very definite bias against the aged and it nowhere more evident than in a hospital.”

“How do you know that?”

“I was my mother’s patient advocate until her death. I encountered a routine lack of respect and dismissive attitude towards her and the other elderly. Making sure that she received respect, medically and personally, placed an additional burden on me and sucked up energy that I had hoped to give to her.” I felt the anger rise again. I pulled the sundae closer to me, I picked up the spoon, and started eating.

“Are you saying she was being treated as an old woman and not...” He paused and waited.

“Roslyn. My mother’s name was Roslyn.”

“Yes. Not as Roslyn.”

I continued. “The staff prejudice said old people were slow, deaf, difficult, fearful, forgetful, and demanding.”

He said, “There is some truth in that.”

“I know. However, their exaggerated behavior is often just a symptom. They living beings with accomplished lives whose emotional state is skewed by pain, drugs, fear and disorientation.”

He nodded. “Not who they really are.”

“It felt like my mother was just a body to be fixed. In the current time-managed intensive reporting short-staffed short-stay hospital model, efficiency favors ‘treat the problem’ rather than ‘treat the individual.’”

“Is that what upset you?”

“Yes. I get so frustrated every time I think of my mother in that situation. I wished I’d done more. Knew how to over-ride the system from the outset. I might have saved her from the indignities she suffered. I did get a lot smarter over the years and made sure her final months were as she wanted.”

“How long has it been?”

“Six years since she passed.”

“It still hurts, doesn’t it?”

I nodded and reached for a tissue as my eyes filled with tears. “I miss her.” I wiped my eyes. When I looked up, he had shifted his position so he was able to look directly at me. His eyes softened with an unasked question. “What?”

He said, “What might helped Roslyn in the hospital, besides you?”

His question surprised me. “I have no idea?”

“Seems hard to believe. You’ve been living with this a long time.”

I licked the last bit of the sundae soup from the bottom of the container. He waited without a word. I took a sip of my coffee and cleared my throat. Something popped into my head and I blurted it out. “I think along with the myriad of intake forms, there should be one about the patient’s life and preference history. It might help make them people in the eyes of the staff and encourage multi-dimensional care.”

He smiled. “Sounds like a plan.” He stood.. “I’ve got to go. Your check is on me.” He turned to leave.

“Wait,” I said. “A plan?”

He stopped, faced me, brought out his wallet, and slipped out a card which he handed to me. “I’m starting my internship at Montefiore this fall,” he said. “Let’s stay in touch. If I can help, I will.”

I gave him my card in return and said, “Thank you for listening.”

He tucked my card into his pants pocket. “I look forward to hearing from you.” He checked his watch. “I have to go.” He waved and left.

After the last sip of coffee, I put his card in my wallet and stood. On my way to the door, I paused at the register and spoke to the manager. “Your son is a very nice young man.”

The man said, “He’s not my son. His parents’ own the building.”

That piece of news caught me off guard. “Oh,” I said, my effort to share my good feelings thwarted. After a second, I rebounded with a big smile and said, “And by the way, the ice cream sundae was delicious.”

He said, “We don’t serve ice cream.”

I walked out and smiled all the way home. I was so grateful to the knight in shining armor, who paused in his journey, setting aside his quest just long enough to slay my inner dragon.