In Photographs

By

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My older sister and I drive the two hours to Mom's house in the woods. The familiar side road off the highway snakes deeper into the hills. I crank the wheel for the sharp left onto her steep gravel drive. Mom's dream home. The carved wood sign out front reads, "Acorn Acres." We have a routine. Check the sell-by dates on the food in the refrigerator. Six dozen eggs this time. As many bricks of cheese. "We said we'd take you shopping, Mom," we say. "Don't be ridiculous," she says. "I'm perfectly capable of driving to the market. Been doing it all my life." My sister and I look at one another. Our eyebrows lift. Mom's daily drive into town, clutching the same tattered shopping list in her pocket—especially this time of year, negotiating the busy lot in the snow—terrifies us.

A photograph of my mother at sixteen, the year she left her rural hometown for college, hangs in my office. Two braids tied with ribbons rest on the breast of a homespun gingham dress. Bold eyes under peaked brows interrogate the camera. Her parents insisted she study something practical. Nursing, she assured them, then majored in anthropology.

The following weekend, my other, younger, sister and I drive the two hours to Mom's house. Sleety rain pelts the windshield. Our mother hasn't been answering the phone. When we arrive, the front door is unlocked. The heavy drapes are drawn, the shadowy living room is ice box still. A scent of decay permeates the cold. Her bedroom is an obstacle course, tossed sheets and covers, an upended lamp, phone off the hook. She's in the guest bedroom under a mound of blankets, eyes unfocused. A storm of wadded tissues litters the bedspread. We limp walk her to the car, speed to the hospital. Pneumonia. Severe dehydration. When she's settled in a bed we return to the house. Fill the washing machine with dirty linens, toss out frozen food that's been left on top of the refrigerator, moldy bread and cheese, congealed pots of stew and boiled meat left just outside the back door. We can only speculate why. A power outage perhaps. I scan the ragged forest behind the house for bears.

A black and white photo portrait of Mother in her thirties hangs in my dining room. Her hair is shorter than at sixteen, a soft brown halo framing her face. The imperious eyes, arched brows, and proud, aquiline nose are the same. A mature mother of four. She still meets the camera's gaze. But there's a wariness now. Something has begun to close, to shift. "Your father said I should hurry and have a professional photo done before I lost my looks," she once told me. "He could be a very harsh man."

It's spring. My two sisters and I drive to Mom's house in the woods. She's kneeling in the gravel, beside the SOLD sign. "It's like a stake through my heart," Mother says, with uncharacteristic drama. She follows us from room to room and lurks in the corners, hawk

eyed, as we box up her things. We drive to the recycling center with years of bundled newspapers and magazines, hundreds of jars and bottles rattling in the back of the SUV. She twists a ragged tissue as we toss glass into a bin. “I was going to make jam,” she says, wincing as it shatters. We wrestle stacks of newsprint from the trunk. “I hadn’t read them all,” she says, dabbing at her tears.

I mound her sweaters on the bed. So many sweaters. Many of them cheap, pilled acrylic, hopelessly stretched out of shape. “How about you pick out the ten you wear the most? We can donate the rest.” I unfurl a jumbo-sized plastic trash bag and smile encouragement. “But they’re mine,” she says, clutching a pink mock turtleneck to her breast, one of dozens ordered from mail-order catalogs. “They’re just sweaters,” I say, yanking it from her grasp with more force than I mean to. She crumples on the bed, fat tears on her cheeks. I’ve made my mother—my once fearsome, independent mother—cry. Again. Over sweaters. I pack them all.

There’s a photograph of Mom from her summer away. She spent six weeks in Europe when I was nine, leaving us with Dad and his brand of benign neglect. She visited many of the places she’d longed to and never had. Paris, Rome, London, and most of all Greece. In the photo she’s midstride, stepping out on a cobbled street in her wide-collared red coat, cinched at the waist, an inviting, adventurous smile for whoever it is that’s framing the shot. After she returned, Mom played Greek bouzouki records and danced barefoot on our hardwood floors, arms thrust overhead, fingers snapping. The red coat now hangs in my downstairs closet. So much has gone to charity. But not the red coat.

We move her into a smaller house, minutes from mine, unpacking and arranging furniture, art, books and mementos to mimic their placement in her beloved Acorn Acres. From the new house it’s a short walk to a grocery store. We hope the wooded park beyond the front windows will evoke the forest home she left behind. Friendly neighbors walk tiny dogs and wave hello.

The next morning Mom answers the door. She leaves the chain on, wary, until she places my face. In the same rumpled, soiled slacks and blouse she’s worn for days, she clutches a blanket around her shoulders, a refugee in this strange place. “I was afraid to sleep in the bed or touch anything in the kitchen. Thank God you’ve come. I’m starving,” she says. “But these are all your things, Mom.” I show her the food we bought together at the store. Her favorites. Yoghurt. Oatmeal. Almonds. Oranges. The precious objects and furniture she couldn’t do without. The familiar frame has been ripped away. And with it all point of reference, of context. A neighbor leaves a note card in Mom’s mailbox, inviting her to tea. She tosses it in the trash. “No point making friends,” she says, “I won’t be here long. This isn’t my home.”

There is a photograph from my son's wedding ten years ago. "Who's that?" my five-year-old grandson asks, pointing at a slimmer, darker-haired me. "That's me," I say. "No it isn't, Grandma," he says, with a gap-toothed grin. He thinks I'm teasing. That slender woman with the long, dark hair couldn't possibly be his pudgy, gray grandma. "There you are," he says, pointing at my mother who stands beside me in the photo.

My sisters and I wonder how it will be for us in twenty years, or less. "If Mom could see herself, she would be mortified," we say. "She wouldn't want to live like this." She has an advanced health directive, stipulating no aggressive medical intervention in the event of incapacitation or unconsciousness. None of that applies. We whisper amongst ourselves about making pacts with our grown children to not let this happen to us. But what do we mean? What exactly would we tell them to do? And when we're no longer able to recognize our own condition, how are they to decide when the time has come? Is it fair to ask that of our sons and daughters?

Mom asks me to explain—again—where she is and how she got here. "Write it down," she says, "I'm a visual learner." I go through the chronology. Her illnesses and isolation. Selling the house. Buying this one. I draw yet another map of the new neighborhood, with big stars for my house, the grocery store, the park and the library. "Thank you," she says, "That was very helpful." She squeezes my hand. Her face softens. Moments later, her features constrict. "Tell me where I am and how I got here. Write it down. I'm a visual learner." She taps the pad of paper.

Not long after her 90th birthday, we move her to an "independent" living facility for seniors, back in the mountain community where she was once so happy. After unpacking her further diminished belongings—what won't fit now relegated to storage—I spend the night on the couch. In the morning, standing beside me in the tiny kitchen, her pale blue eyes are clear, piercing. "Do you ever have regrets?" she asks. "Of course, Mom. I imagine everyone does," I say.

"I regret getting married. I regret ever having children," she says. I imagine I understand. There were things she'd wanted to accomplish. A picture she'd carried in her mind for so long—since she left home at sixteen to study anthropology, perhaps earlier still. A vision of what her life would be. A picture that, in her mind, remains incomplete, unrealized.

We move her four times in two years, from the smaller house closer to family, to the independent living apartment, then into "assisted" living when she is unable to manage meals and medications and is rushed to the hospital multiple times. Under-medicated. Over-medicated. Dehydrated. Disoriented. In this new environment, she believes every female resident is a thief and every man a molester. She begins to act on her fears, becoming confrontational, making accusations, shoving others away, staying in her room to guard her belongings. We are given two weeks to find her a new placement.

She now inhabits one small room in a locked ward at a “memory care” facility, along with several dozen men and women who stare at the walls in the common areas, wander the halls in search of lost loved ones and rest their foreheads on the tables in the dining room. Each moment is brand new and also like all the others. “I need to find my car,” Mom says, when I visit. “I hope no one’s stolen it.” She squints at me, mouth tight, wondering, I imagine, if I’ve taken the car too, like I took the house, the wretched sweaters and everything else, her precious belongings now reduced to a few paintings and photographs, clothing and bedding. “It’s late. I need to get home,” she says, eying the dark windows nervously. “Where am I? Where is this place?” She doesn’t ask me draw a map, to write it down. She’s forgotten that she’s always been a visual learner.

There’s a photo taken in the small, enclosed courtyard of the house in Davis, where Mom first lived after she left Dad for one of her co-workers. Flowering vines climb wood trellises lain against the stucco brick. Four generations sit side-by-side on a bench—Mom, her mother, me and my older sister with her toddler daughter, Mom’s first grandchild. In the photo, Mother is younger than I am now, still working, banking towards a long retirement, the chance to finally do all the things she’d held in abeyance to raise children, finish her degree and gain the financial stability to support herself.

My children scarcely remember their great-grandmother, a woman who, even in my memory, was always white-haired. When Mom’s gone, I imagine my grandchildren won’t remember her either. And even for my children, the last ten years of a grandma who doesn’t bathe or change her clothes, who asks the same questions on a continuous loop—how old are you, are you in school, who do you belong to—have irrevocably colored earlier memories of my opinionated, globe-trotting mother.

My sisters and I hope the memory care facility is the final move, that Mother’s physical health doesn’t begin to decline such that she requires nursing care too. Her new doctor—after prescribing an anti-psychotic medication to manage increasing paranoia and delusions—remarks, “Your mother is amazing, strong as a horse. I’ve never seen a patient remain so lucid on the dose I’ve prescribed. Physically, there’s not much wrong. Likely, she’ll live to see one hundred.” We all know this is not cause for celebration.

Mother has one sibling, a brother, seven years younger. In a 1935 photograph, they are thirteen and six. Her first day of high school. His first day of grammar school. A droopy spit curl bobs on her forehead. She wears a plain homemade dress belted around the narrow waist she used to brag about and that none of her daughters inherited. Her little brother—in stiff new overalls, several sizes too large, with a good six inches of hem folded up on each pant leg—rests his fluffy head on her hip and gazes up at his big sister.

The last time her brother visited, Mom cried. That was several years ago. He e-mails me seasonally, to inquire how she is. “I hope to make it down to see her next Spring,” he wrote at Christmas. He said the same thing the year before. She turns ninety-five this July.

When I visit now, she's often asleep—at least her eyes are closed—on her back in bed, covers pulled up to her chin, fully clothed, shoes and all, clutching a worn handbag to her chest. If she'll let me, I look inside and toss the desiccated sandwiches wrapped in grease-stained napkins, the onion rings she sometimes plays with, slipping them onto her wrists as if they were bracelets, the half-eaten donuts and cookies, stale and crumbly as dirt clods.

I bring mementos from the collection of books and photographs still stored at my house. "You loved France," I say, handing her an art book from the Louvre. "You used to go several times a year." With a vague smile, she turns the pages, too swiftly to focus on any of the illustrations. On my next visit, the book is gone. Likely she's asked one of the staff to return it to the library.

There are dozens of photograph albums from Mother's travels. After leaving Dad, she was rarely home. "I've done my time," she would say when we asked her to babysit. Between the photo albums' padded covers, she rides a camel, holds a trowel at an archeological dig, poses between the marble pillars of the Parthenon. She's on a beach in Bali or Hawaii or Belize. The sun sets. The ocean shimmers at her back. Her face is lifted to a twinkling night sky. In a flowing white caftan with gold piping at the plunging neckline and around the billowing sleeves, she spreads her arms, embracing the place, anyplace but home, and the man I imagine is capturing the moment. In photographs she is timeless, living a life of her own choosing.