

“WHY HAVEN’T YOU VISITED ME?” My mother is bitter and angry.

“I’ll be there in a couple of weeks.”

“That’s too late. It’s all going. 1 – 2 – 3.”

“What are you talking about? I’ll be there very soon.”

“There are three things wrong with me, you know. My head, you know, the patchwork quilt. Three plus five. Why aren’t you coming? I’m losing everything.”

I want to tell her she hasn’t lost me, but I don’t know if that’s true. We both drift into silence. She comes back.

“I have bad news: they don’t provide any catchment in this place.”

It takes me a moment to realize she wants to use the bathroom. “It’s just around the corner through your bedroom.”

“Really,” she says, disbelieving.

I store this conversation in the tightly closed compartment in my brain where I put my mother. In an act of solidarity I sink into silence with her. I practise not knowing and not seeing. I pretend I don’t know she wears mismatched shoes and puts her shirts on inside out. I am silent about her confusion, her memory loss, her laying down of pencils because they will no longer make words. I lose my own voice and the words that bind me to myself.

My mother can no longer organize herself into the person she believes she is. Her disconnected words refuse to align into coherent sentences. Her typewriter sits unused on a small metal table in the corner of her living room. An artifact on a folded blue blanket, a presence that comforts and agitates. The imaginings of her troubled mind are trapped inside, and without the reprieve of storytelling my mother is lonely and frightened. All her life writing was the glue that held her together and now she has come unstuck. It has happened fast and I haven’t moved on from my visit sixteen months earlier. Then I had journeyed east to help her prepare to move from her apartment to a retirement home.

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THE APARTMENT IS WEIGHTED WITH heat and humidity and my mother is dancing between half-filled cardboard boxes, thin arms and legs protruding from a sleeveless patterned pink dress. Her unwashed hair hangs just below her ears, the heavy black frame of her glasses slides down her sweating face and her belly

swells against the worn polyester fabric. Her bare moving feet keep the beat that sends her back 50 years to a young slender woman in British army uniform partying with the officers in wartime east Africa. I pretend to be awed by video images of thin women in short skirts and black tights moving in perfect symmetry, but I rewind the tape only to watch her chalky toenails dance again on the lint-covered imitation Turkish carpet.

It is obvious which boxes I have packed because they are carefully labelled. “Books-Africa” is next to “Family photo albums 1953-1969” and straddling both boxes is “Winter coats.” My mother writes “Misc.” on her boxes tossing into one a few books, an old blue sweater, a kitchen pot and five souvenir mosaic tiles she bought 25 years ago in Istanbul. Later she searches endlessly for these tiles portraying a sultan and his horses, disbelieving when I say they are packed.

“The ghosts have stolen them,” she jokes.

I change the topic. “Mom, Doris will bring more boxes if you need them.”

“I don’t need more boxes and if I do I’ll just unpack some of those.” She gestures toward the bookcase neatly stacked with my filled boxes.

I am alarmed. “No, you can’t do that. Those are ready for moving.”

She agrees meekly, because I have suddenly become agitated.

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THE THINGS MY MOTHER GETS confused about are those she doesn’t want to be bothered with: which bank her savings bonds are in and how to operate the remote control for the VCR. Last fall the public health nurse said she didn’t have Alzheimer’s.

“Just normal aging memory loss,” the nurse reported cheerfully. “I’m teaching her to always leave her keys in the same place—in the brass bowl of coins on the coffee table by the apartment door.”

Maybe my mother does have Alzheimer’s or some other irreversible dementia. Maybe I should have been more concerned last month when she asked, “Tell me again why I am supposed to call Shady Villa.”

“Because they want to know the day you are moving in.”

“But I can’t call. They gave me a number and I have lost it. If I can’t find the number they won’t know who I am.”

Maybe my mother wants to lose her mind. Her friend Doris visits. She is a good Christian woman who does good deeds, and one of these is taking care of my mother. Taking charge, really. Doris met my mother fifteen years ago, just after her brain surgery for a benign tumour. My mother was unwell for a long time

after that. I used to resent Doris but now I am infinitely grateful and send her cards of appreciation. As Doris lowers her considerable self into the old frayed swivel rocker, my mother shrinks into a child's tragic helplessness.

"Remember, Doris, that nice retirement home you took me to on Mountain Drive. Do you remember? They called the other day and offered me a place."

"Yes, Mary, it's a good place. My cousin is so very happy there."

I'm annoyed. "It was \$2,000 a month and only a small bachelor room."

My mother ignores me and looks plaintively at Doris. "It must be so nice to be able to choose where you want to go."

"I just keep telling you, Mary, that this is not forever, and you can always move if it doesn't work out."

I am horrified and my voice climbs unpleasantly. "Mom, what are you talking about? You want to go to Shady Villa; you put yourself on the waiting list and you go to the outreach program every week. You've been telling me how happy and pleased you've been since you have made up your mind."

Doris is suddenly rigid. "Everything will be just fine. I am sure it is all for the best. Look, Mary, I've brought you some of the baking I did yesterday."

Later my mother is angry with me for being rude. I am angry back. "Why do you play helpless," I demand, "when you are quite capable? Why do you pretend you are being forced into something that's your decision?"

"I know you think it's sick," she responds, "and probably it is, but all my life I've wanted someone to look after me, and Doris does."

I grit my teeth, unsure whether I am holding in tears or laughter.

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MY MOTHER IS SLEEPING ON the couch and I am lying on her narrow bed, hot and restless, reading her journals. Despite the open window, the room is stifling, as is every room in every home my mother has lived in since she left my father and the thermostat wars that she always lost. The journals are small black binders, carefully dated and filled with lined loose-leaf paper covered with a small cramped English schoolgirl's writing. I haven't snuck into my mother's private words since I was a child snooping in her writing files, reading the romance magazines in which she published her stories. Now, as then, I am seeking to find my mother through her words.

I pick up the journal dated 1976-1979; the time when my daughter was born, and my mother had returned to England to care for her aging parents after her only sister died. I crawl back into bed, attempting to make a comfortable backrest

out of hard and lumpy pillows, and laugh when I read her description of visiting Vancouver and the big communal house on Welwyn Street. She got it right, down to the details of the overflowing compost and the note in the bathroom explaining why soap shouldn't be used and the glass jars of herbs and grains lining the kitchen walls. *An uneasy night in the basement. saw five mice just before bed. I told housemate Ralph and he said, "Oh, they are so nice I can't bear to get rid of them."*

I am absent in this record, although there is a description of my bedroom. Her room is a vast improvement on mine. It is light and gets more sun. My mother is centre stage in the journals and I understand that they are compositions in which she is attempting to locate herself. She lists the places she goes and the people who visit her; she notes the dates she receives mail from her children (and the dates she doesn't). My brothers and I exist only to affirm her identity as woman and mother. Perhaps we exist to simply affirm her existence. We are props.

Today? it is my birthday. it has been forgotten by everyone. What do I deduce from this? The message comes clearly that I am not a person of importance. No-one cares enough to make sure a card got here today. it makes me stand back and realize that I am nothing but a reject. it also makes me rather angry. I stare across the room, my gaze settling on a desk cluttered with letters and manuscripts, remembering my years of hostility toward my mother and how I used to toss her self-pitying letters into the garbage. Now her words touch a deep realization that we could not help each other, and her belief of utter unlovableness shatters me.

I pick up 1992-1995. *laughed a lot today. Maggie acting silly at dinner and everyone joining in.* I have appeared in the story and am glad my mother has been happy in my home during her last visits. She no longer casts me as a betrayer who refused to understand or help. I turn out the light, close the curtain against the rising dawn and fall asleep.

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IN THE MORNING I CLEAN MY mother's kitchen. She runs her fingers over the cabinet doors.

"Such a nice brown colour, it doesn't show dirt."

I say nothing. I scrub the sink, scrape grime off the dish draining rack. I pull up the plastic mat she likes to keep beside the rack and attack the slime underneath. When she's not looking I throw out moldy food from the fridge and don't tell her there is a roll of aluminum foil in the vegetable cooler. My mother's dirty kitchens have historically been an act of rebellion. My mother liked to write and dream more than she liked to clean kitchens. She wrote Harlequin romances, true

confession stories, novels about the war, travel articles. As we walk by an old house on Bay Street, she tells me, "When I worked at the library I rented a room in that house. I never told anyone. I would write there at lunch time. That was one of the happiest times I've ever had." My mother preferred fantasy to reality. Once, long before she left him, my father threw her typewriter down the stairs in a fit of jealous rage. Long before that, when they were first married, he wrote a letter to her parents about his love for his new wife, only at the end mentioning his hurt exclusion from her writing.

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TWO DAYS AFTER I FLY HOME to Vancouver, she phones, disorganized and cheerful. "I've been working long hours at the post office."

My heart thuds loudly in my chest in the sudden silence that follows.

She laughs, "Well, that's what it feels like to me, sorting through mounds of old correspondence. I start to go through a pile of papers and I have to read each one."

I realize she is making a joke. She knows I'll think she's confused. I imagine her at work, her mind sharp and clear: each newspaper clipping a meaning she has not forgotten, each postcard an image and story attached. Last week I helped her sort a stack of disordered papers and found a magazine clipping for Janine's Special Meat Loaf. Assuming she would not be cooking in the retirement home, I threw the recipe in the garbage but she retrieved it.

"No, I cut that out of the *Saturday Spectator* about three or four months ago. I want to try it."

I picked up the clipping and saw it dated exactly three months earlier. She remembered correctly, and I felt guilty. Like a spy, a police investigator, I was monitoring her mind.

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AFTER THE MOVE, SHE SENDS me a thank-you letter. *Many thanks for your most timely visit. I am so delighted by your thoughtfulness and kindness. My love to you, my dearest girl.* This is a new kind of letter. The old were marked by bitterness and resentment. *I am thinking about your visit and I am sorry it was so short. I always wish you could stay longer, but all of you children have such busy lives. I know that you have important things to do.* Those letters tightened me. This one cracks my heart.

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SHE CALLS IN A STATE OF extreme anxiety. “The maintenance man breaks in every night. He threatens me. He stands over my bed with a hammer in his hand.”

She is convinced that people are being attacked in other apartments. “I can hear them screaming but nobody comes. This is a dangerous place. People break in whenever they want to and take my things.”

“It’s an illusory enemy, Mom. The locks on your door are strong.”

“Perhaps it’s just my brain. It doesn’t work right.” She sighs.

“The things you are seeing aren’t real.”

“Yes, I know.” There is comfort in the idea that her brain is acting up because this is familiar territory. Ever since the brain surgery there have been years of headaches, visions, auditory hallucinations, sounds like rusty nails being poured into a bucket. She drafted a novel about it all. The brain deteriorating with age, neurotransmitters dying, lesions growing: the spectre of dementia is far more frightening.

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SHE PHONES AGAIN, HER VOICE tentative and old. She is disoriented in this new place and has a confused story about my brother. “He’s taken everything,” she complains. “I’ll never be able to trust him again.”

“What did he do?”

“He took my pension cheque and held it up in front of me and then put it in his pocket and said that it was his now.”

I am silent, trying to imagine any truth in this story.

Suddenly she digresses. “They wouldn’t let me move my plants. They said I couldn’t take those old plants into a brand new apartment.”

“Who said that?”

“You know, those men.”

“Did you take them anyway, even though they said you couldn’t?”

“Yes, but I had to do an awful lot of sneaking around to get them.”

I think my mother is the old plant and she feels undeserving of this new home, uncomfortable with its barely finished newness. She tells me, “There are no rods for drapes and the doors stick, but perhaps that’s normal in new buildings, I don’t know anything about them.”

Later I discover my brother had deposited the pension cheque into a bank closer to her new home. The movers did indeed leave the plants, as they had no room in the van, but they brought them the next day.

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"I'M HAVING MORE HALLUCINATIONS." I sit in my living room in the dark listening to her on the telephone before I go to work. Outside, streetlights illuminate the falling rain and the occasional chestnut leaf drifting down. "There was a monk in long brown robes who floated through the air. He pushed me onto my back on the bed and made the sign of the cross on my nose. I was terrified," she says, fascination in her voice.

"I have been thinking," she continues, "that all my life I have been working to get somewhere, working toward something and this is where I have got to. There is nothing more to work toward and I will never find happiness. That's what I was always trying to get to and working so hard for and now I need to accept this. People don't want to talk about these things."

"You mean dying?"

"Yes," she replies. "But also this other. I don't know how it came to this." She doesn't elaborate, but I know she is thinking of living in the retirement home, subject to paranoid hallucinations and frightened of losing her mind. It is hard to accept that acceptance is her only work now. Acceptance is my work also, as I realize that she is more tormented by the drift into wordless confusion than by the idea of death.

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IT IS RAINING AGAIN. On the kitchen table is the last letter my mother sends me. I'm lucky to have it because there is a telephone number where the postal code should be, and the straggling letters only tentatively organize into my address. I don't know if I am shivering from cold or because I am losing my mother. This woman, whom I have spent most of my life pushing away, has softened with me. We have learned to curl against each other and I want to grasp this love that has come late.

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THE NEW APARTMENT IS disorganized because she hasn't had enough help unpacking and because she relentlessly moves everything around. Her thoughts are scattered like the papers of her life she constantly shuffles. She carries boxes of writing manuscripts, letters and newspaper clippings from room to room, emptying them into piles on the kitchen table, under the couch, on the bed. Suddenly the words connect and she tells me, "Things don't matter so much any more."

"Does that include people?" I ask.

She nods. "Don't feel hurt, but if you had cancelled your visit I'd have felt sad and despairing but it wouldn't have lasted long. It would be fleeting."

I leave the apartment and walk down the hill to Main Street. Ice patches on the sidewalks, sun softened during the day, are now frozen into a treacherous smoothness and a cold wind freezes the hot tears on my cheeks. I am caught by an unexpected surge of grief as strong as the November wind blowing directly into my face.

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ON THE WAY TO THE MEDICAL clinic, I notice my mother knows every street corner, directing the cabbie with authority and confidence.

“Do I have Alzheimer’s?” she asks the doctor.

The doctor looks at the nurse. “This not a diagnosis we are willing to make at this time.” This reassures my mother but not me.

I try to take comfort in the knowledge that she has always been somewhat absent, withdrawing into writing, interrupting conversations as if she had not been hearing what was being talked about, losing keys and worrying that she left the stove on. Fearfulness has been her constant companion. In the clinic I adopt a relentless optimism and deny the extent of her changes. But at dinner it’s impossible to ignore.

She sits at a table with five other women, using a tablespoon instead of a knife to cut her chicken. She stares across the table, her mouth slightly open and a wisp of vacancy in her face. She holds her hands together under the table and her twisting of them reflects her unspoken level of anxiety. As we get out of the elevator on her floor she turns to me suddenly. “They all hate me.”

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SHE IS FINDING IT MORE and more difficult to be alone. I am finding it difficult to be so far away, and am always on the telephone, listening.

Tammy, the clinic nurse, phones. “Your mother is depressed and lonely and has lost 10 pounds in the last month. She is terribly frightened by these hallucinations. The doctor wants to put her on a .5mg dose of Risperidone to control the hallucinations.”

I don’t tell Tammy that my mother has always seen ghosts and wouldn’t go into the laundry room of her last apartment. I resist the Risperidone, but my mother is desperate and wants to take it.

My youngest brother phones. “Mom asked me where the bathroom in her apartment was. I told her that she could find it if she looked. She wandered up and down the entrance hallway, opening closet doors and peering on shelves. It was terribly sad.” He subscribes to the philosophy that my mother can be trained

if only we could find the right person to do this.

Joanne, the retirement home coordinator, phones. “Your mother comes crying to the office. She says she cannot manage her life and that she cannot meet everyone’s expectations.” Joanne hesitates. “Your mother is cutting up her underwear with scissors. She’s putting used toilet paper in the sink. Her false teeth have disappeared.”

My mother doesn’t phone—she can’t manage to push the buttons in sequence—so I call her. “I can’t bear what is happening,” she tells me tearfully. “Something is dreadfully wrong with my mind.”

“It’s tough, Mom, I can see that.” I don’t know what to do.

“I don’t know why everything is in French or German. I can’t understand those languages. When I’m gone you’re going to have to do all the writing.”

“You’ve written all your life. I’ll take over now.”

She becomes restless. “I have to go. I need to go upstairs. That’s where the mending is. I have to do the mending.”

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I PHONE THE DOCTOR, SEEKING a precise diagnosis, but he doesn’t have his file with him and can’t remember.

“The Shady Villa staff told me the charts say lacunar dementia.”

He expresses surprise. “I don’t know that I would make that diagnosis.” He continues, “Your mother’s dementia is pursuing a tragic and relentless course.”

I know this.

“The past predicts the future.” I interpret this to mean that she will continue in this rapid decline.

“The old tumour and brain surgery used up brain reserves. The interplay of brain trauma and dementia speeds up the dementia. This may also explain your mother’s trouble with words, which is not a usual feature of dementia.” He promises to call when he has his file, after he has refreshed his memory.

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I WISH SHE WOULD DIE. I fantasize a brain tumour, a terminal cancer, an accident. She wishes she would die and fantasizes suicide.

Joanne calls again. “Your mother doesn’t want to live. She tells me she’s going to walk to the bridge and jump off. I don’t think she would be able to follow through.”

I don’t either but suddenly I remember that the bridge spans the freeway only three blocks from the retirement home. Perhaps she could. Perhaps she will.

I hope she doesn't. I don't want her to die. We are confused, my mother and I, wondering how to make our way through this new territory.

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JOANNE GENTLY BUT PERSISTENTLY tells me that my mother is no longer able to live alone. The Shady Villa staff want to transfer her to the nursing home, and tell me she'll be happier in a small space where the walls contain her and the only door leads to a corridor where there are always people. They want to put her in a small room with a hospital bed and space for a dresser, a TV, her clothes and a few photographs. They think she will be happier. What are they talking about? My mother will never know happiness now, the happiness she has pursued all her life, not unless you count vacant unknowing as a blissful escape from suffering.

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THE NEXT TIME I CALL HER, she asks me, "Do you know I am moving next door sometime soon?"

"To the nursing home. Yes, Mom, I know."

"I'm very pleased," she continues, and then drifts into silence for a few moments. "Of course, none of the alternatives are any good."

I have nothing to say to this.

"How is the treasure?" I know she is referring to her granddaughter but I deliberately misunderstand.

"Do you mean me?"

"You can be the number two treasure." She laughs. This is good enough for me, and I graciously accept.

"Please visit." The asking is not the old leaning that invoked guilt, just a simple request. "It would really help, dear, if you could come soon. Please come before it's too late." I hang up the receiver and am choked with tears.

I have given up spying and denying and have given in to something else. I book a plane ticket.

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SHE PATS THE COUCH, INVITING me to sit beside her. "I want to speak with you."

"About what?"

"I want to say goodbye. The light has gone out." She stares at me. "When I am gone I want you to write everything down very quickly. Before you forget."

I have been massaging her feet and now ask her to massage mine. I close my

eyes and feel her tiny delicate hands on my bare foot. Tingling sensations go from my foot right through the top of my head. "It's like being rocked," I say. When I open my eyes I see she is crying.

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"GET SOME PAPER," SHE ORDERS ME. "You have to write down everything."

"How shall I begin?"

"We have to take notes on the last year." I wait. "It began with a lot of heavy weather. There was a move. We can embellish it later. Sometimes I started writing."

I write all this down in a red spiral notebook I find on top of the fridge.

"I can't remember the right order."

"Well, just say it in whatever way it comes. I'll sort it all out later."

"You have a lot of script to work from if you ever feel like doing it." She is silent for a long time. "Put a line underneath to indicate that it's not finished. You might find it awful."

I wait.

"You know one day there will be a flinging down of pencils."

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UNLIKE MY MOTHER, WHO HAS always been terrified of the emptiness beyond words, I have touched stillness in my life, learned to love the spaces between words, days of total silence the most precious gift in my life. Well, perhaps sometimes it is like this for her. Who knows? She leans on me, trying to find in my presence a way to live without words.

Sometimes we share a quiet peacefulness. The stillness between us is an expanding space. She knows what is happening to her and she knows I know and she knows there is nothing I can do. She takes refuge in my presence, and I take refuge in the quiet. Then I can hold it all, for both of us.

In the quiet she whispers, "I'm sorry I'm such a burden."

"You're not a burden. It's okay with me that you are just as you are."

For a moment her mind clears. She hears my words, and looks thoughtful.

"Thank you," she says.