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Watching A Mother Slip Away

Tuesday, October 12, 2010

Janice Arenofsky
Special To The Jewish Week

‘I’m getting older every day,’ the octogenarian repeats. Once valedictorian of her high-school graduating class, she now hugs a toy bunny to her chest. ‘‘What should I do next?’’ she asks, as if she’s at an amusement park instead of at a Jewish nursing home in New Jersey.

The geriatric assistant sums up my mom’s condition in one word: ‘‘confused.’’ Yesterday my 86-year-old parent believed she was in an airport; today, she may be Alice in Wonderland, bewitched by a rabbit.

‘‘I love you, bunny,’’ my mother says. She tells me (correctly) that the furry animal is a gift from her grandson. I’m amazed that this memory is accessible — hundreds of others are buried deep in her ‘‘recycle bin.’’

Sometimes I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. My emotions may be jagged, but hers are smooth and bounce about like silly putty.

This is the ugly reality of vascular dementia — a giant step backward to childhood with none of its charm. Her illness is second only to Alzheimer’s in the way it obliterates brain tissue.

My mother used to be a witty, well-read woman. She played bridge, drove to the library and debated politics with close friends. She attended temple, cooked Passover meals and lit memorial candles each year for her parents. Now she demands to be tucked into bed at night.

Like her two sisters and husband before her, she embarks on a Gulliver-esque journey. Her travels, though, will not take her to the Land of Giants or Lilliputians, but to the Isle of Cognitive Decline. And all this will happen in the locked unit of a nursing facility.

My sister and I experience guilt for not sacrificing more — for rejecting the obvious alternative: providing 24/7 care at one of our homes. But the truth is, neither one of us can handle the physical and emotional demands of a dementia patient — even if that dementia patient happens to be our mother.

So we watch and hope — hope she feels secure and cared for here amid strangers, and that her general complaisance signals calm acceptance.

I want to believe Mom regards herself nonjudgmentally, kindly. But can dementia and self-acceptance peacefully coexist? I want to believe so, but skepticism threatens to quash my faith.

Mom's laughter can quickly segue into heart-rending sobs and obstinate refusals to eat meals or take her meds. But she also likes to explore — she slips in and out of other patients' rooms, as if searching for buried treasure.

Does she derive pleasure from these wanderings? No one can say for sure.

What experts can assure me is that vascular dementia may soon become the mind robber of the millennium. Many baby boomers like me will confront this monster in their aging parents. Some may face it in themselves or a spouse. I quake in fear, even while I drink my red wine and exercise my mind with books and bridge.

Computer-literate, I surf the net, looking for a miracle cure.

The day we moved Mom from her assisted living facility into the nursing home, she went voluntarily, without fuss. For us, it was like the first day of kindergarten. Only Mom was the child.

On the plus side, she expresses her love verbally and physically — behavior she never exhibited before the dementia. It's as if the illness banished her internal censor and gatekeeper, making her less stingy about showing affection. I enjoy hearing the words "I love you," and I have to believe she enjoys saying them.

Is she happy? I ask my sister. The question hangs in the air like dust motes. My sister shrugs. I don't ask again.

The nurses sometimes increase her meds so she won't be "agitated." I'm wary of this term, since I believe it's nursing home code for "bothersome." Sometimes they accuse her of reaching out and grabbing other patients, pinching them. Often she screams out in the dining room, where she picks at the kosher meals.

And then there are the good days when Mom sings — it can be patriotic songs, Sinatra classics, anything her mind free-associates. Mention the word "stranger," and you may get a few bars of "Strangers in the Night."

Is this how my mom squeezes sweetness from her life? Does the dementia permit joy despite the steady loss of brain cells? I'll never know for sure. But when I hear the lilt in her voice or see her smile or reach out to embrace her great grandchildren, I feel hopeful.

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Janice Arenofsky writes for national magazines and can be reached at www.janicearenofsky.com.

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Submitted by Observer (not verified) on Sat, 10/16/2010 - 21:00.

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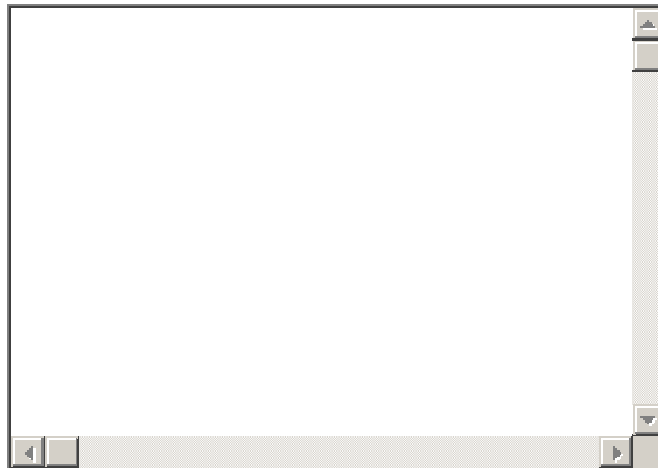
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