

Mothering Mom - Mothers Always Write

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I had no idea what I was up against moving an 88-year-old woman with dementia from Pennsylvania to New Jersey. The only way to get Mom to leave home was to pretend she was just coming for a visit. She retained a fierce determination to remain independent. It was a brazen act that required the meticulous planning of a bank heist. Only the loot was human. My brother Pete was the getaway driver as she was most likely to cooperate with him. Like many mother/daughter relationships, ours had a bumpy history. Now, it was my turn to step up to the plate and care for her. Bringing too many possessions would arouse her suspicions so most were left behind to be picked up at a later date.

All went according to plan and Pete delivered her to my door. Yet, in a dark corner of my mind I recoiled at the trickery we'd employed. I had good intentions. She couldn't care for herself any longer. All her friends were gone. She'd be near family. Something she'd always wanted. And I'd found the perfect place: Arbor Terrace, a senior residence in the next town, that's tucked between a Marriott hotel and a nature preserve. Her apartment has trees right outside the windows. It's even got an elegant restaurant downstairs. I'd happily live there. Only she hated it the first time she saw it.

The first month was hell. She was even more disoriented than before. But I was determined to help her create a new life here. I visited her every day and stocked her apartment with items to make her comfortable. Soon I found caregivers to be with her when I couldn't. Every Sunday we had Mom

over for dinner. Our new weekly ritual, with all the strange added layers of memory loss. We've lived in this house since 2001 and it's a way station between her past and present. Time skips around when she visits. She forgets that Alex, her first grandchild, is now a senior in college.

One recent Sunday, my husband Gary and I decided to sneak in a movie after our dinner with Mom. When we finished eating, she asked for a bus schedule. Being at our house always triggers an automatic reflex that she has to take a bus home to Philly afterward. I went through the usual routine, repeatedly explaining that we'd drive her back to Arbor Terrace, a mere two miles away. Then she asked the perennial question that pops out when she suspects I'm trying to ditch her: "What are *you* doing now?"

It was 8:30 pm and we intended to catch the 9:30 show of *Mission Impossible Fallout* –not my top movie choice, but Gary loves action films and I knew it would make him happy. And more pleasant with my mom, who was wearing on his nerves. In that uncanny way that people with senility seem to have, she'd picked up his annoyance with her at repeating nonsensical routines and this was something she didn't forget. Obviously, some preserved part of her brain retained these slights.

"We're going to the movies," slipped out before I could stop the words.

"Can I come?" she asked like an eager child.

I paused a fatal second, in which she replied with a slightly hurt tone, "unless I'll be in the way."

"Of course not. Yes, we'd love for you to come."

She beamed with happiness. "We're going to the movies!"

I went upstairs to "use the bathroom" and warn Gary about the change in plans.

"Really?" was all he said, an eyebrow raised in a dubious way.

"Sorry, let's make it work," I whispered.

So, we took Mom back to her apartment to drop off her things, including a half-eaten portion of salmon, which I stuck in her fridge. I figured there was a 50/50 chance she'd forget that we were going to the movies and I'd slip out. Fat chance. In the elevator and back upstairs, she gaily repeated the "we're going to the movies!" refrain in a singsong voice, interspersed with, "if I'm not in the way."

As we left, Mom grabbed her walking stick – an actual stick that she found in the woods. You'd never guess that this tiny frail woman, who's hunched over from osteoporosis, is an unbelievably fast walker. She often leaves us in the dust as she powers her way forward. Her stick is a last vestige of bygone independence. I tried replacing it with a colorful, adjustable cane bought at CVS. She turned her nose up at the cane. Later I found it hidden in the hall closet, a dementia dungeon crammed with lost and rejected items.

The stick was coming to the movies.

We got to the cinema, paid for our tickets, and found seats. The first preview was extremely loud and violent, and my mom asked in a horrified voice for me to make it softer. This reminded me of when my then two-year-old son Alex demanded from his car seat, "Mommy, move the sun!" It was in his eyes as we drove.

I ran out to the lobby and asked one of the bored teenage candy clerks to turn down the volume.

"Okay," she mumbled, not moving.

"Please, it's really loud," I begged.

She rolled her eyes and slowly made her way upstairs to ask the manager.

Back in the dim theater, I sat down. The movie had started. My mom was talking and when Gary shushed her, she got upset.

Let's go in the hallway," I said softly, as others around us began grumbling.

"Why?" she demanded.

I sat down, knowing this was a volatile standoff. Never argue with a toddler.

I took her hand and held it. She calmed down.

The movie was two and a half hours of nonstop violence. Dead bodies piled up as Tom Cruise and assorted villains chased each other in cars, helicopters and motorcycles. A particularly savage bathroom brawl ended with a lake of blood pooled across the floor.

Not the *Mission Impossible* remembered on TV from my youth.

My mom sat deerlike, frozen in her seat with eyes wide open, unable to look away.

I began nodding off, the only escape from the relentless carnage. Occasionally I'd wake up, catch enough of the plot to realize there was still a long way to go. Then, I'd will myself back to an unconscious state.

All the while, my mom gripped my hand, which had long ago lost feeling.

She never liked movies, at least not typical Hollywood fare, and especially violent blockbuster action flicks. Eric Rohmer was her cup of tea, back when she could follow a storyline.

But somehow, she stayed with it the whole way, while I escaped in my cowardly catnaps.

"I saw this a few years ago," she remarked as we all left in a daze, "only I didn't stay for the whole thing."

I didn't argue. Maybe I'm learning.

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