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The Visit

It's always the same. There's something about that unpleasant mixture of odours that pervades the corridors of most Care Homes, and this one is no exception.

I've tried to take a deep breath before walking into reception, but it does little good.

I could feel my shoulders going down as I walk towards the room, and for the umpteenth time I try to make a conscious effort to paste a smile on my face and stand tall as I walk in.

And as I feared, Mum didn't recognise me when I entered the room.

For a while, in her early days as a new resident, she would revert to being Mother, and chide me if my posture didn't please her which, God knows, happened often enough since she used to be a dance teacher and I disappointed her because I had neither interest nor aptitude.

"For God's sake, Moira, find your centre, bear down, stand tall!"

It was painful, not least because it was a phase when she seemed to see me only as the disappointing adolescent daughter, as if she had forgotten the subsequent mending and repairing of our relationship.

"You just have to grin and bear it," as my late husband used to say.

Funny how I would now be quite pleased if she said this to me, because that level of awareness has gone. I'm never quite sure what reception I'll get these days.

Sometimes she doesn't recognise me at all. Once she seemed to think that I was *her* mother, and since I never met my grandmother, I didn't know how to handle *that* role.

Another time, she ignored me when I first arrived, and then, suddenly fixing me with a fierce look under lowered eyebrows, demanded, "What are you doing here?"

It was terribly difficult for a while, because it would take me a day or two to recover from the wounds she casually inflicted on me.

And it felt so wrong because it was so casual, and that behaviour was so very different from the woman she had been and the mother/ friend she became after I got married.

The only person who seems to understand my feelings and gives me realistic support is our local Anna Friend, who encouraged me to persist in my visiting and also assured me that my mum was experiencing phases and that these would pass.

“It’s particularly difficult for close family members”, she told me, “because they bring their own needs, expectations and history to each encounter and, umm, because of hurt and disappointment, they then reduce or even stop visiting.

They feel they are losing the person, and they give up.”

It’s good she said that because I was, indeed, on the point of reducing the frequency of my visits. And she used the word, ‘encounter’ and that set me thinking...

“But if you persist you can push through, because the greatest gift you can give your mum is to be there, present in whatever mental and spiritual space she inhabits. It’s horribly difficult but it’s actually about her, not about you.”

If she had told me that when I first met her I think I would’ve cut her dead ever afterwards. Fortunately, by the time she told me this, I’d met her a few times and I’d had enough unhappy visits with my mother to prod me into asking for advice,

And so I learned to think about each visit as if it was a bubble. Each visit was a new one; each time it was a fresh start.

Anyway, if I didn’t visit Mum, who would? My sister lives far away and we often speak on the phone but she only gets down to visit once in a blue moon.

All this made me wrestle all over again with my identity, which seems ridiculous for a woman in her late middle age, but it also made me think about some pretty deep things, stuff I’ve never really thought about before because, well, you just have to get on with life, don’t you?

And when my husband died... at first so much to do, yet later on, deserts of time, and I felt, numb, and horribly invisible.

But as the Anna Friend said, it’s not about me, is it?

Somewhere inside my mum was the same person, and I started to look for the spark, that bit of her that hadn’t changed. It wasn’t in her memory because her memory was totally random and erratic, coming and going like the sun emerging from behind the clouds. After a while I guessed that in some funny way, I was looking to connect with her soul. I mean, what else can you call it?

Which of course meant I had to think about my own.

And it made me wonder about all the times with her I had taken for granted. I found myself asking my sister for her memories but she didn’t really get what I was asking, She thought I was trying to fill up some sort of well of memory, but that wasn’t it, at all!

I learned to prepare for each visit, as if it was a special mission. It was a task, a labour of love, and I learned to never go empty-handed. An object, a photo, some craftwork- all gave a moment and a focus.

And I had to prepare myself. A few times, I didn’t, rushing in with my mind full of other things, the shopping list, household chores, a missed phone call from a needy friend which I needed to return. This was a big mistake. I’d leave feeling that I’d done more harm than good, to both of us.

Then I got another surprise. Another change. Everything shifted after my Anna Friend came in one day and visited with me. To my surprise, it turned out that my mother could recall memories from



Sunday School and she enjoyed and joined in saying the Lord's prayer, and also remembered snatches of Psalm 23.

It was all rather embarrassing at first. But later it got easier, because these words and prayers calmed her and I soon realised, they comforted me, too. So now there is large-print card propped up on her bedside table, with a picture of hands and a text saying,

"I will never leave you nor forsake you"

And that's where we've got to. Mum is slipping away, yet sometimes when I'm sitting with her in silence, our time is companionable, and she feels close. We have our moments. The other day she pointed out the open window at a singing blackbird, turned to me and asked, "What's that?"

It hurt that she had lost this easy recognition.

"It's a blackbird, Mum."

"Oh, I know *that*," she said, using the scornful tones only a parent can take with a dense daughter, in that strange mixture of love and wry amusement at a child's ignorance. "But what's it saying?"

For a moment I was at a loss, scrambling to climb back into her world with her, and not get left behind.

Then I remembered some of the words of a hymn, one I knew she knew, so I recited, "Praise for the singing, praise for the morning."

"Ah", she said, "beautiful", and we sat quietly together listening.

Then she turned and peered at me, really looked at me, reached out and patted my hand.

"There there, dear," she said, "it will be alright."

Did Mum know something I didn't? I didn't understand what was going on, why she said that, but even so, I felt better.

Later, I phoned up my Anna Friend and told her this story. She laughed, and said it reminded her of the words of someone called Julian.

I looked it up later, because saying, "it's alright" in the face of dementia is ridiculous; really quite absurd, and if anyone else had said it I would have got quite cross with them. But because Mum said it, I had to listen. Somehow, these words rang true.

This is what I found.

"It is true that sin is the cause of all this suffering, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

I say these words, out loud, every day, now, and also speak some Bible verses.

I thought I was there to comfort Mum, but it turned out that it was she who comforted me!



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