

Nancy
Morgan Smith

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Five patients are sitting in their wheelchairs, grouped around a table. The big man with his back to me has his right arm raised in the air as if he were leading the conversation. Two women lean forward and seem to be listening closely. My mother, Nancy is also talking. Without looking down, she wipes the surface of the table with her right hand, a gesture I have seen her make thousands of times. The second man is sideways to me. His head is moving; he must be nodding in agreement.

It looks like five friends preparing for a card game perhaps or just chatting about the morning news.

As I approach the table, however, I realize that the two women are asleep. The man with his back to me also has his eyes closed. His raised right arm is rigid, except for the fist which is clenching and unclenching. The other man is muttering, “Engineer. Bridges” over and over again. From previous visits, I know that he was once a prominent engineer and built bridges. Nancy with her little smile is the only one who is actually having a conversation but she is just making sounds, not words.

When Nancy first began losing her memory, we talked to her doctors in Florida where she lived. “Just getting old,” they said. The word “Alzheimer’s” never came up. We didn’t know what it was until that summer when she was visiting Aspen, Colorado where she had lived many years earlier. She loved the music and was a lifetime Trustee of the Music Associates of Aspen.

One day a woman who worked in the Aspen Post Office called me. She said that Nancy had been calling her four or five times a day to complain about her mail delivery. I was puzzled because I knew that her mail had been arriving regularly. Finally, this complete stranger said in a gentle voice, “I don’t know you personally so I hesitate to intrude but my mother had Alzheimer’s and she acted just as your mother is.”

This is the way it is with Alzheimer’s. Generally, you learn about it from other people who have experienced it with family or friends, not from medical personnel.

Our next step was to persuade my mother to come from Florida where she had a home to Denver where we lived. “A short visit,” we told her. We found her an attractive small apartment in an assisted living facility. “This is a strange hotel,” she would say. “All the people are old.”

Soon she began making repeated trips to the supermarket next door, loading her cart with all sorts of treats and then wandering into the parking lot. She would stand there, not sure where to go next, holding onto the huge cart of food. A manager would come out, collect payment for the food and steer her to the assisted living facility. She would then stack the food on a table with the food she had bought the day before and the day before that and it would soon all spoil.

As this wandering became more and more pronounced, my sister and I decided to obtain a court order appointing us co-conservators and arrange to place her in a closed facility so that she wouldn’t wander and endanger herself. We decided on a ranch-style home in south Denver that had four other residents and a home-like feeling. The morning we picked her up at the assisted living facility to take her to this new home was one of the most painful – and also most ludicrous – days of my life.

We had been told to give Nancy a mild tranquilizer in pill form before leaving for the home. I dropped the pill in her coffee when she wasn’t looking, waited for a few minutes and then stuck a spoon into her cup to make sure that it had dissolved. To my astonishment, it was still hard as a rock. So, with my sister distracting Nancy, I tried to crush the pill with the spoon. She turned, caught me straining over her coffee cup and exploded in anger.

Earlier we had looked at Alzheimer’s nursing homes but we were horrified by their institutional feeling. We soon realized, however, that this ranch – style home wasn’t going to work. It simply didn’t offer services like the continuous nursing care that she needed.

So, feeling great guilt, we transferred her to an Alzheimer’s nursing home in Aurora, Colorado where she would spend the remainder of her life. The head nurse was a tall, soft spoken woman from Ghana. Most of the nurses were Nigerian. They were the

kindest women imaginable, caring for people who could never thank them, who could only go downhill.

Alzheimer's is said to be the cruelest of diseases. I'm not so sure, however. My mother never suffered the physical pain of cancer or so many other end-of-life illnesses. In fact, Alzheimer's seem to shut down much of her sensitivity to pain. One day, for example, another patient closed a door on her fingers, almost severing the tip of one. Initially she cried out but never thereafter showed any signs of pain.

In addition, she had no awareness of how this disease had robbed her of the beauty, grace, humor and athleticism that had marked most of her life. Take her teeth, for example. Several were broken and the dental hygienist insisted that we get her to a dentist. Our dentist said, however, "This is dangerous. I'd have to sedate her which is not a good idea. And if I pull these teeth, there's a danger of infection. If it were my mother, I'd do nothing." We did nothing.

The cruelty is the impact of Alzheimer's on family members and friends. It's as if the person you loved has fled, leaving only a husk of a body. So it's tempting to believe that the person you loved no longer exists, that she is just a memory. Many relatives do this, assuming that their loved one is gone. That is a terrible mistake.

Over the course of more than five years of visits, I saw the residents of my mother's ward emerge with distinct and compelling personalities. There was Leo who grabbed my arm during that first visit. "Let's get out of here," he said. I quickly recognized him. He had been a Deputy District Attorney in Adams County, Colorado when I was a Public Defender in the late 1960s and we had tried many cases against each other. His grip was just as fierce and unyielding that morning in the home as it had been when he would grip my arm outside the courtroom and tell me that my client had better plead guilty.

I tried to communicate with him but the friendship we had had years earlier had simply vanished from his memory. Then one day I noticed that he was losing weight. The nurses said that he wouldn't eat. Something had told him that it was time to go. Soon he was dead.

There was Lorraine with her jokes and her thin white hair tied in a tight bun at the back of her head. I doubt if she had ever been what you would call good looking but she had an extraordinary wit and sense of humor that must have given her a very special life.

There was the woman cradling a doll named Buster; the bent over woman with the thin, curly hair who would quietly come over and hold my arm while I was sitting with my mother; Nadine with her smile; the polite, gracious former airline executive; the tall, wiry man who kept clapping his hands; the engineer trying to recall those many bridges he had built; the German woman who would pet the little dog I always brought on my visits. The women outnumbered the men two to one, a fact that made me aware of my own mortality.

I always brought Rabbit, my little white dog with me. She would go from patient to patient, calmly sitting in their laps so that they could pet her.

As I stood in the doorway that morning, watching Nancy and the other four patients, I realized that, despite their various afflictions, they had their own way of communicating. Maybe it was nothing more than the warmth of being in the company of other humans. Now Nancy is gone. Now I realize how much I'll miss those visits, wandering down the hallways to her ward with Rabbit, just sitting in the dining area, watching and listening.