



## Last Communion

Reluctant to grant her mother's final request, a daughter  
discovers a way to say goodbye.

**M**Y MOTHER KNEW SHE HAD ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE long before it was diagnosed, her symptoms an eerie reprise of my father's dementia a scant decade earlier. "When the time comes," she said, "give me a pill."

"Mom ...," I hesitated.

"Please. ... I don't want to live like that."

Her words bring back my father's last moments. Once again, I imagine his determined walk to the balcony door, which he opens and closes in one fluid, silent movement. Far below, sea breezes rustle the palm trees, the reflection of a full moon spills across the Atlantic and several boats motor northward on the Intracoastal Waterway, some strung festively with holiday lights. But my father sees none of this, or all of this, as he pulls a chair to the balcony rail and hoists his 6-foot-5 frame up onto its faded cushion. Teetering, he steadies himself in air as humid as a ceremonial bath, stares out at the inky horizon, then tumbles down into the night sky.

My father's death was like his life: aggressive and dignified. He had been an Ivy League football star, a war hero, an oil company executive, a gambler. Shuffling glassy-eyed down some nursing home corridor would not have been his style. For my father, suicide seemed the only plausible option. We had no weapons, he was beyond understanding pills and Dr. Kevorkian's macabre carnival would have appalled him. I realize too that in taking his own life, my father somehow believed he was saving ours.

What I didn't realize was how much time I needed to say goodbye, which is impossible when death is instantaneous. Perhaps that is why I continued to reconstruct and ritualize his death, to create a rational, compassionate context for an act that was violent and abrupt.

I remember the grain of his satiny walnut coffin and the black folds of the minister's robes, illuminated by rays of afternoon sun. I remember trying to synchronize my breath with my newborn daughter's, warm in the crook of my neck. Only in retrospect did I understand that this loop of images, this internal keening, was an integral part of my grief.

By the time I moved my mother into a senior residence — "finishing school" she once called it — she was paranoid and disoriented. I found books in her oven and money in her

freezer. She filled her Mark Cross handbag with TV remotes, topless lipsticks and maps of London, and carried it everywhere.

Now, sitting and clutching her pocketbook in this new apartment amid her beautiful antiques — the silver-flask collection, the Biedermeier desk and her beloved early editions of Dickens and Austen — she looked lost, unmoored, like a bewildered little girl.

The mother I had known was slowly disappearing, but strangely, I felt a flickering of relief. Her only child, I was no longer solely responsible for her life, or her death.

Yet three years later I began to think that maybe I was. Maybe I should help her. It was, after all, what she had wanted. She was becoming increasingly frail and agitated, and though her doctor said she could live another 10 years, I knew my mother wanted to die. Something in the way she grasped my hand, urgent, beseeching, told me she was ready.

I began to canvass the doctors I knew, all of whom were reluctant to make suggestions. When I found one who would — "AIDS patients overdose on fentanyl patches." "A shot of potassium stops the heart." "Have you read 'Final Exit'?" — I felt paralyzed. If my mother could no longer consciously participate in this process, how could I?

As it turned out, I didn't have to. My mother, refusing to eat, was admitted to a hospice nearby, where she died nine days later in what I firmly believe was a final act of will. Toward the end, she became serene, even recovering forgotten language.

"See? Faces ...," she whispered, extending her delicate hand skyward. "I am so ... happy."

I leaned down. She caressed my face. Then, with our cheeks pressed together, our breaths became one — inhale, exhale — rhythmic, elemental, as primitive and natural as labor. We were moving together by way of the spirit, revisiting some distant terrain similar to the one we had shared in silence for nine months.

This connection — more intuitive than mystical, more common than rare, more ordinary than miraculous — was bred in the bone. I'm convinced that it is deeply embedded in all of us.

Had I accelerated my mother's death as she had once asked, I would have missed this last communion, this infinite bond, which granted me an extended, tender farewell — and my mother a final measure of grace. ■

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