

Koans From My Mother

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I was driving my mother from my sister Sue's house to my own home last June when she said, "Sue has been my daughter her whole life. Why don't I know her mother?"

It was as if my mother, whose mind had been steadily losing ground to Alzheimer's, had become a Zen master dispensing koans.

I'd busied myself that spring establishing a sort of monastic discipline of my own, preparing for my mother to move in with my family and me for the summer. In an attempt to shape a habitat that would suit her increasingly unruly mind, I'd come up with a simple creed to which I vowed to adhere, and I'd encouraged my husband, Larry, and our daughters, Maddie and Anna, to subscribe to it as well. That creed was this: *Things fall apart. Move on.* This philosophy was intended to guide us in the areas of language, cooking, sleeping, bathing, and other daily activities that would be affected by my mother's presence among us. Exhausted by prior attempts to impose reason and structure onto the madcap landscape that had become her world, I decided to eschew the holy order of the conventional and stop badgering my mother about the facts. Things fall apart. Move on.

"My children are all dead," my mother told our dinner guests one night shortly after she'd moved in with us. Through a colossal effort of will, I resisted the urge to correct her and continued refilling her iced tea. She meant (I think) that her *siblings* had all died, but nouns shape-shifted on her these days, and pronouns changed places shamelessly and unpredictably. One June evening I found her standing in the living room of a lake cottage we were renting. She was clutching our cellphone and aiming it at an ugly lamp on the end table. "Where's the TV?" she asked.

I couldn't resist. "That's a cellphone, Mom, not a remote. There is no TV here."

She locked eyes with me. "That's because *she* doesn't like the TV," she said.

"She" was me, and my mother was right about that, at least; I don't like television.

Subscribing to a new orthodoxy of mayhem, my husband, our daughters, and I were determined to tolerate and even uphold a gentle anarchy that I hoped would allow my mother to feel comfortable. I saw us as inhabiting a sort of cognitive

antigravity chamber, a cerebral space-station summer camp where none of the usual rules applied. I hoped we would float about and not knock into one another too much. We could return to solid ground in September, when I would go back to teaching high school, and my mom would go back to my sister's house. With luck we would all remember how to walk again when the time came.

This was the third summer that my mother had lived with us; the third summer since she'd lost her husband (my father), her house, her community, and — lobe by strangled lobe — the ability to articulate her thoughts. My failure to demonstrate a steady patience and affection over the previous two summers had registered as "sin" in my Judeo-Christian-inspired *Index of Impossible but Absolute Principles by Which Good People Live* — a Talmudically detailed reference manual that resides in my head and remains open, year after year, to chapter 1: "Good Daughter/Bad Daughter." One day, during the first summer she'd stayed with us, Bad Daughter had barked, "Mom, you can't *swallow* your car!" (She'd meant her pills.) Immediately afterward, I'd bumped my head — hard — getting groceries out of the van. *Well, I deserved that*, I'd thought. *Deserved?* What was next in the way of self-recriminations: a hair shirt hidden beneath my clothes; sharp stones in my walking shoes?

My compulsive need to make my mother stick to the facts hadn't worked for either of us. So, to the best of my ability, I was declaring a fact moratorium this time around. Because a freewheeling attitude toward the facts does not come naturally to me (I require my American-lit students to use a template for their thesis statements, and I slap automatic C's on papers that slip even once from the third person), I'd prepared backup in the form of alcohol, tobacco, and Xanax — "the triplets," as I liked to think of them. It helped just to know they were there in the pantry, ready and waiting. I expected to call them all into service before the summer ended.

When my sister had delivered our mother into my care, she'd assigned me a number of tasks, to which I'd raised no objections; Sue handles virtually everything during the nine months that I teach school. "Here are mom's doctor appointments," she said, handing over a list that included dates with a cardiologist, a neurologist, a podiatrist, an internist, a urolo-



gist, and an ophthalmologist. I pictured a giant Lazy Susan on which elderly parents under their children's care could be positioned to revolve every twenty minutes or so, stopping before specialists who would minister to their brain, heart, feet, eyes, or teeth. "Also," Sue said, "Mom needs new bras."

My mother is from an era when sturdiness rather than sexiness drove the underwear business, so I took her to JCPenney.

This assignment turned out to be trickier than the assorted

doctor visits. To begin with, my mom didn't know what size she wore. Then there was my own prudery regarding parental nakedness, which made me reluctant to get right inside the fitting room with her; I set her up with a half dozen brands in a few different sizes and took a seat in the stall next door. But the real challenge was the impossible design of bras themselves. She muttered and sighed and finally wailed, "I don't know what I'm doing!"

(end of excerpt)