Who's Frying Baloney?

The Joy of Writing About Sucky Experiences

"Foxtrot: My Mother's Last Dance," Nonfiction (published in Bewildering Stories, 2025)

Foxtrot: My Mother's Last Dance
by Ellen Weisberg

You know how you can hear phrases so many times, for so many years, from the same person, that you stop hearing it? "Hi pussycat" and "Hi sweetheart" were the words my mother would greet me with- either in person or over the phone. That is, unless she was angry with me, and then the words icily changed to "Oh hi Ellen," a phrase that could be flat and soul crushing at the same time. "Hi pussycat" and "Hi sweetheart" were words I ended up both taking for granted and deeply relying on for a sense of security for all the years of my life. To think a day would come when I would no longer hear them was unfathomable.

After her diagnosis of metastasized breast cancer, I had been soberly and silently bracing myself for the day when both the words and the woman who said them to let me know I was in her presence would be taken away forever. I have always joked about how I could never be an actor because I can't memorize lines, but the one thing I can do is cry on cue. All I had to do was think about the unspeakable happening to my mother and it would bring on a flood of tears. A week and a half ago, the unspeakable did in fact happen, unsurprisingly accompanied by… a flood of tears.

I cared for my mother for close to five years after my father died. His death, unlike my mother's, was sudden and unexpected. I had been divinely blessed with one final conversation with my father that wasn't tense and disturbing and that was focused on something other than some financial issues he and my mother were weathering and that I was trying to navigate. We had been able to banter about a couple of pleasant topics during that magical chat that we were both interested in, and I was able to end our conversation with "I love you."

We always think we have more time. We mindlessly go through our days and busy ourselves with the things that life conditions us to think are important, until we are

faced with something that bonks us on the head with the reality that time is a gift, not a guarantee. And so, when I flew down to Florida to attend my father's funeral, I hugged my mother hard and silently vowed to be there for her in ways I felt I wasn't with my father- at least not in the final weeks of his life. She hugged me back, but her shock and grief were stronger at that moment than her need for consolation, and she suddenly let go of me with her eyes wide and searching for answers that she knew weren't there.

A poignant reminder of the connection I had with my mother was her response to a question asked by the rabbi who had taken care of my father's funeral. He had gathered the immediate family in a small sitting room adjacent to where my father's funeral had been held. He probed her about her plans to go forward.

"I think I'd like to live near my daughter," she said, turning to face me.

Hearing her say that gave me a mix of emotions, mostly gratitude and love, but also relief. I had vowed to try to be there for her in a way I wasn't for my father, and having her close enough so as not to have to jump on a plane was going to help me keep my vow. That said, knowing my mother, and knowing me, I knew this transition and new normal for everyone would be rough going. I caught a glimpse of my impending mom-laden life many months before she moved up north. Despite much time having passed since my father himself passed, my mother insisted, loudly and with lots of cursing, that it was too early for us to look for a place for her and that she wasn't ready. There were many financial and practical reasons why continuing to live in her and my father's villa down in Florida wasn't an option, but she continued to fiercely dig her heels deep in denial until she finally accepted her new reality and agreed to move.

The next sobering wakeup call was my mother's disdain for her first apartment, a ground floor one-bedroom in Lexington, Massachusetts, near the Revolutionary War battleground where the famous shot heard around the world was. I was excited about it, not just because of its historical surroundings, but because it was literally a stone's throw away from a food store and hair salon and it was a quick drive from downtown Boston. My mother had boasted about being a city girl, born in Queens and raised in all its neighboring boroughs, and she claimed she wouldn't settle for living anywhere but in the city when she moved. Given how vulnerable and dependent she had become just in the months that lapsed since my father's death, we knew her "Carrie from Sex in the City" dream was just as unrealistic and impractical as her moving into a rent controlled three-bedroom on Pluto. And so, we worked hard to convince her that Lexington would be a reasonable compromise that came with perks the city didn't have, like being able to park your car without having a stroke, having your rent get you more than the equivalent of a closet minus utilities, and not needing to hike to a nearby laundromat.

"So, what do you think ma?" I asked after she arrived and started slowly moving toward her new digs with her swollen legs that had been in a cramped moving van for many hours. She couldn't see the place in person ahead of time because of restrictions having to do with the Covid pandemic and had only seen photos of it online. "Do you like it?"

"Not really," she said, along with an edgy chuckle.

"Not really" was the general, discontented vibe that followed for the next several years, although reassuringly sprinkled with outbursts of gratitude and even the occasional high praise in the form of "You've been wonderful" and "You are keeping me

alive." To say it was all or none with my mother would be a bald-faced lie, as both the life she lived, and the person she was, had many endearing and- at the same time- provocative layers. I supposed the same could be said about most of us.

The Lexington apartment was at best a placeholder, just something to get her up from the palm trees to the pines, as well as all her belongings, an abundant enough amassment to fill a palace or two. I knew it was difficult in those early days for my mother to mask her misery, having first lost her husband and then her beloved Florida and spacious villa. But I also knew how difficult it was for us to bear the brunt of her unhappiness, and this very noxious and corrosive mix would on occasion wreak havoc like a methamphetamine lab explosion.

"Get out of my apartment!" she screamed at my husband one evening, after we tried- and failed- to set up her huge antique doll collection to her liking. It was also after we tried- and failed- to find space for the furniture that fit well in a villa that was twice the size of her current apartment. She complained it looked more like a storage unit than an apartment, and she had been barking orders like a *Full Metal Jacket* or *Officer and a Gentleman* drill sergeant with an air of entitlement that made Veruca Salt look like Joan of Arc. The final straw that made my husband say something was when she criticized how our daughter, Emily, was displaying her individually wrapped nesting dolls. Both he and Emily left, and I started to follow.

"Don't go," she said, gesturing for me to come back inside. "Come back, let's talk."

I hesitantly complied and sat down in a chair across from her.

"I don't want to be here," she said. "I miss Florida."

"But you can't live in Florida, mom. We talked about this I don't know how many times."

"I don't care," she said.

I stood and started to walk out the door again.

"Don't go," she said, gesturing again. "Please come back."

I turned around and sat back down.

"I really don't want to be here," she said.

"Mom, do you realize how that makes me feel when you say that?"

"I don't care," she said. "I miss Florida."

"You miss Florida from like 15 years ago. Before dad got sick. Before you moved from Pine Ridge to Cypress Lakes and lost touch with most of your friends."

She was quiet.

"You have us up here. You wouldn't have us in Florida."

"I don't want to be here," she said. "I feel like a prisoner."

I stood up. "So go back down to Florida, ma. We'll make the arrangements." I began walking toward the door.

"Don't go," she said, waving her hand for me to sit. "Please let's talk."

"I don't know what there is to talk about, mom. It makes me feel unloved when you say what you're saying. We worked very hard to get you up here."

The pushing and pulling went on for another few minutes, with my mother lamenting, tormenting and relenting and my blood pressure soaring. While things quieted down enough for me to finally leave her apartment in peace and join my family

outside, this same dynamic continued for the next few years, during which time I tried to exert dominion over emotions that ranged from unconditional love to unmitigated rancor. My mother chalked it up to us just getting used to each other. I agreed that this may have been part of it, but I also remembered a fair amount barroom brawl-style upheavals between my father and her over the years. While I didn't exactly have the patience of an angel or solidity of a stoic, I knew my mother's demanding and difficult nature would make for a rocky ride.

The fantasy I had of her using a personal pushcart and doing her own food shopping quickly evaporated when it became clear that she didn't know where the food store was, despite it being so close that we could literally pucker our lips and send a flying spitball that could land on the back of it. I tried surprising her one day with a bag of groceries, which I thought she would be grateful for. Instead, I was greeted with some foaming at the mouth and "Oh, Ellen… This isn't what I want. I like coffee ice cream, not vanilla." Her lips took on the shape lips do when the person is really pissed off. "And I don't like this brand of chips. Next time don't do this, OK? Wait until I make a list and then go to the store!" Of course, I walked out in a huff, as what I thought was a good deed had indeed not gone unpunished.

The Lexington apartment came not only with WIFI but also- according to my mother- an "inconsiderate asshole who stomped around in what must have been army boots at all hours of the night and when the hell did the schmuck ever sleep?" My mother complained about this person, whom we learned was a physician, every time I spoke with her on the phone or visited. We left little notes- at her insistence- on the upstairs neighbor's door and even talked with him in person about her complaints. He was very nice and accommodating and promised us that he would try to walk more gently around his apartment, especially late at night. However, my mother's complaints continued, and her neighbor's patience gradually wore thin and to the point of him telling us that he was trying his best to be quiet and politely suggesting that perhaps it was my mother that had the problem. All this weighed into our decision to find her another place to live, one that was considerably closer as we were growing weary of driving an hour to and from her apartment multiple times a week to retrieve misplaced glasses or to find the television remote or fix her television as it wasn't turning on because she hit something that she shouldn't have. We also held out hope that another place might be less lonely for her, as all Lexington offered was one elderly woman whose husband was in a nursing home and whom my mother swore was a "weirdo" as well as a raging antisemite.

We moved her into a one-bedroom, third floor apartment that was around a five-minute drive from us, in Westford, a neighboring town. We experienced a bit of déjà vu, with more antique doll-related drama and hysteria that this time featured my husband accidentally breaking a glass shelf in the antique doll hutch during the move that he tried to replace as quickly as he could. Unlike her last apartment, my husband wasn't forcibly expelled from this one, but the glass plate nonetheless was recalled by my mother multiple times as being irresponsibly and unforgivingly left broken and this led to a few heated arguments months later between my husband and her. The good news was that between a decent amount of downsizing of her stuff, a sizable walk-in closet for her extensive wardrobe and pocketbook collection, brighter light, and more space in general for her furniture, she seemed much happier with her new surroundings.

All was good and we were collectively breathing a sigh of relief and rejoicing when our hopes and dreams were suddenly dashed by the emergence of yet another "inconsiderate asshole" on the floor above who- according to my mother- sounded like he/she was dropping bowling balls all hours of the day and night and it was so loud that she couldn't hear her television. And even more alarming was that there was- again according to my mother- a "clueless schmuck" living on the floor below her supposedly playing music at all hours of the day and night and it was keeping her awake at night. When I visited her, she would interrupt our conversations, point upward toward the ceiling and say to me "do you hear that?" Then she would scream, "Knock it off!" on the top of her lungs. During those nights when my brother or I would sleep over, we would often be awakened by her yelling from her bedroom, "Shut the hell up!"

I took my mother to see the front office manager a couple of times, where she broke down in tears and complained about noises coming from upstairs, or perhaps downstairs, and she wasn't really sure, but it was really goddam disturbing wherever it was coming from and she needed something to be done right away because this was no way for a human being to live. In addition to the apartment manager circulating a threatening notice to everyone within range of my mother's apartment, I even called a non-emergency police line to see what could be done to put an end to what was making it hard for anyone in my mother's world to get a good night's sleep. Sadly, despite a village effort to get all the assholes and schmucks to surrender their garbage pail lids and buzz saws, the noises and my mother's complaints continued. Desperate pleas for her to consider cotton balls in her ears or white noise were vehemently rejected, and so we prepared ourselves to accept our new reality: mama wasn't happy and therefore, nobody was happy.

But the truth was, my mother was as complex as the life she insisted on making for herself, and for every shitty eye-rolling here we go again moment we had with her, there were also the five or six-hour long Scrabble tournaments that she kept driving with a grinning and breathy "One more!" And her exclamations when we went out to a restaurant for dinner about how delicious the food was, and her appreciation of the pleasant drives I would take her on while listening to her favorite Neil Diamond music, and the thumbs up signal she gave with a big smile in photos of her enjoying her meals. She was a good sport anytime I'd push her in her transport chair down a ramp or hill and momentarily lose control, causing her to scream. There were the many conversations we had, about her friends and who she was still gratefully in touch with and those who had disappeared without a trace and had broken her heart. She talked about missing my father, and she talked candidly about her complicated relationship with her own father, who she realized she loved but didn't really like. She often asked me to fill her in on the latest that was happening with certain drama-queen friends, and she never got tired of listening, and she did it, for the most part, without judgement.

My mother ended up going through a revolving door of doctors, starting with my personal Boston-based oncologist, whose limited patience with her curmudgeonly ways caused some friction. Because we were late for an appointment one day, he had made us wait an extra 3-4 hours until his last scheduled appointment. He was sitting at a computer in a room across the hall from us and undoubtedly heard my mother loudly ask, "What the hell is taking him so fucking long?" and "By the time he sees us it'll be time for dinner." When he finally came into our room, he unleashed a few demeaning

remarks about us being late, although I had personally believed that we had sufficiently paid our dues by sitting so long in the waiting room, our asses had become physically fused to our chairs. Later when we were heading to my car, she confessed that she didn't think he liked her very much. I just drove us quietly home with a knot in my stomach.

The real death knell, though, for this doctor came after he refused to see my mother unaccompanied by me, during Covid, despite that I tried to let the hospital know she was terrified of seeing him without me. The fact that I was a fellow employee who daily and randomly roamed the same halls as the oncologist, as a masked researcher employed at the same hospital, apparently had no clout. My mother ended up being escorted away from me by hospital personnel like we were family members being separated at a Border Patrol facility. It took a "Karen" performance by me, like the kind you see in YouTube videos, for the oncologist to finally bend the rules for the in-office visit and let me join them.

I transitioned her to a different hospital that was closer to home, with another oncologist, whose days with my mother were short-lived due to her Chicken Little over-the-phone hysterics every time my mother had new CT scan results that caused my knees to fold and my colleagues having to pick up the pieces of my shattered hope and spirit. This was coupled with nebulous treatment plans, one which I privately researched and discovered was completely inappropriate for the kind of cancer she had and which the oncologist sheepishly admitted she doubted would work but thought it might still be worth a try. Another treatment caused severe hyperglycemia that landed my mother in the emergency room with blood glucose counts of 700 mg/dL. This led to my mother's brief stay in a rehabilitation center that she despised so much she was basically unofficially expelled from it. The ousting came after a profanity-laden screaming match my mother had with a roommate who she mistakenly accused of keeping her up every night despite the true culprit not being her roommate but rather a man suffering from dementia. It also came after she was reportedly wheeling herself up and down the halls of the rehab and calling everyone there a "pig" and a "fucker."

My mother's next oncologist was a keeper, as his kindness and compassion and tendency to not descend into madness in response to every test result seemed to be better suited to my mother's needs and a better fit for my nerves. He initially placed her on an old chemotherapy drug from the 1950's that required twice daily dosing spread out by 8-12 hours. This went fairly smoothly, save for the times she was visited by my brother who took her out to a late morning breakfast and then found himself stalked at a local diner by a huffing and puffing and very pissed off sister with the cancer medication and a pill box in a clenched fist.

I noticed a sharp decline in her mobility over time. Even after we gave her a walker, it seemed like a Mount Everest climb for her to get from her bed to the bathroom. Her difficulty walking was traced back to a bad fall she had taken in a hospital, not long after she moved up north. She had tripped over her own feet while ironically surrounded by a group of doctors and nurses at a routine oncology appointment. A possible fractured hip, which was never officially diagnosed because she refused to get an x-ray, coupled with a prolonged, bedridden, stay at the rehab, seemed to mark the beginning of the end of my mother's ambulatory days. Also gone were her short trips to her kitchen to prepare big bowls of egg salad or to chop up and

freeze aluminum foil-wrapped chicken that she had enjoyed thawing and eating. I remember her saying how she was slowly losing everything, and while her heart was stubbornly clinging to her independence, her mind and body were tugging her in a different direction.

She had asked me to buy her a bunch of cans of beef stew, promising me she would eat it, only to express no interest in the literal fortress of cans I set up on her kitchen counter. Feeling a little desperate as it was clear she couldn't feed herself any longer, I prepared a big bowl of snacks, including pudding, apple sauce, cookies, crackers, and cakes, and I placed all of it within arm's reach of her bed. We hired a private nurse to administer her medications and prepare a bowl of oatmeal with melted butter for her each morning. I was responsible for bringing some kind of real food for her in the afternoon or evening, every day. This kind of half-assed buddy system surprisingly seemed to be working and alas my mother did not starve. But her ability to bathe herself was questionable, and we were screwed if anything happened- like a fire drill- that would require her to bound down three flights of stairs. Not a day went by that I didn't worry about her.

During the two years that she lived in the Westford apartment, we had lots of arguments. They were the banshee screaming kind that made us say dark things that we knew we didn't mean at the time they were spewing from our mouths but that we nonetheless couldn't seem to stifle. My mother told me to "Drop dead" once. This was quite the opposite of what she used to tell me when I was younger, which was that she loved me so much she would die for me. The roots of at least some of these "knock down drag out" episodes were my mother's anxiety or frustration about something that may or may not have had anything to do with me directly, which I nonetheless took personally and reacted badly to. There were also times when we didn't argue but I was the one in a bad mood, snarling and barking and trying to keep it together but to no avail. I had apologized to her during these all too human and flawed episodes and tried to offer up excuses as to why I was sounding so bitchy. And I recall her lovingly saying, "Oh, honey, you're fine. I'm not picking up on any bad mood. It's in your head."

It's funny how I now struggle to remember the triggers for any of the foul moods or tensions or just general inane bullshit that existed between us. At the time it seemed our need to feed into whatever we were going through was stronger than the need to appreciate the time we had been blessed to have with each other. While youth may be wasted on the young, I suppose it could also be said that time may be wasted on the living. My mother had often said after my father passed that she felt guilty over the way she had treated him at times when he was sick, and that she wished she had been more understanding and kinder when he was alive. Whenever she mentioned this to me, I would think about my relationship with her, fraught as it was with these silly arguments that I knew I would be similarly feeling guilt over… someday.

The time had finally come when even my mother, with her decreased mobility and inability to safely shower or even grab dresses from hangers in her closet, couldn't argue that she was unable to live on her own. We went through a series of home health aide services that offered only very exorbitant hourly prices and times of the week that

their staff were happy with but that were too many or too few for my mother's needs and comfort. One assigned a young woman, who showed up and did some dusting and emptied my mother's dishwasher for a few minutes and then spent the next four hours and forty-five minutes sitting in the living room scrolling social media on her iPhone. Some charged very little but also gave us very little, like a teenager who said one week that my mother would have to provide her with all the cleaning supplies she would need and then ghosted her the following week.

A turning point came when my mother and I had a FaceTime chat with her oncologist. He told my mother that the chemotherapy she was taking wasn't really working to control the growth of her tumors, and if she didn't consider enrolling in a special clinical trial that she was eligible for, she would have at most six to nine months to live. Despite both of us getting choked up, her oncologist remained businesslike and quietly waited for us to calm down.

A memory came to me from a decade earlier, when my mother had first been diagnosed with cancer. I had accompanied her to an oncology appointment.

"Is this it for me?" she had asked the oncologist, sitting on the edge of an examining table in her johnny and looking terrified.

That moment had sat with me for a long time. That moment made me cry and feel embarrassed in front of a nurse when I got my very first mammogram, several years before my diagnosis. It had surfaced during my own battle when waiting for test results that would tell me what I had and how treatable it was. That moment made me see just how scared my mother was of her disease and what it could do to her, and it was that moment that drove me to try to protect her from everything she feared for as long as I possibly could.

Up until the FaceTime chat, my mother had been reluctant to agree to the clinical trial because it would have meant the inconvenience of being driven to Boston once or twice a month. The call with the oncologist soberly gave her an idea of what a real inconvenience could look like if she didn't allow herself to be enrolled.

She raised holy hell during her first few appointments and basically terrorized the clinical trial nurses who were trying to assess her. I received an irate phone call from the head clinical trial nurse who accused me of forcing my mother against her will to do the trial and who urged that my mother be removed from it. I had a "come to Jesus" conversation with my mother that resulted in a serious change in attitude that led to her continuing the trial and the head nurse getting off my case.

Because of the intensity of the trial and the fact that it was clear my mother was no longer able to live independently, we tried placing her in an assisted living facility. A monthly fee of $5,000 without the option of any healthcare coverage bought us at least 20-25 desperate and pleading calls to my iPhone a day, franks and beans most nights for dinner, and an astonishing mishandling of her medications by the in-house nursing staff. We moved her out two months later, following an evaluation that deemed my mother to be a high maintenance pain-in-their-ass and that raised the cost of her living expenses to a mere $7500 per month.

We were anxious to get her out of a pricey room she hated anyway, and which had developed a mysterious and rather offensive stench over time. We would miss

some of the residents there, as they were friendly, but my mother had never expressed an interest in getting to know any of them.

Her next destination, for the next 15 months, would be our home. We learned that our house, which was built in the 18th century, was too old with stairways too narrow for us to be able to install a chair lift for her. And so, our family room, on the ground floor and adjacent to our kitchen, was her new living quarters while we resided upstairs. She had a convertible sofa to sleep on, and we set up her antique doll hutch, along with a dresser, television and commode in a corner. We arranged a sweet deal with a neighboring tenant, a former nurse, who agreed to take my mother to her clinical trial appointments in Boston and who would occasionally help take care of my mother if we needed to travel.

Against the odds, we made it happen. We made it happen despite the inevitable, periodic and explosive arguments, some so embarrassingly thunderous our neighbor checked to make sure everything was OK. There was one that caused me to flee the house in a huff and seek refuge at a restaurant in another town while she pressed my husband to get in touch with me so we could talk.

"You can remind her what she said to me," I told him, "And how abusive she can be."

"She said she doesn't remember saying anything to you," he said.

"Yes, poor memory is her alibi. If she can't remember it, it didn't happen."

My mother called out for me a lot, often forgetting that I had just seen and talked with her seconds earlier. Often a crescendo of "Ellen! Ellen!" came at me with no signs of easing up, kind of like a blaring smoke detector. When engaged in a Zoom call for work or a personal conversation with a friend, I would yell down at her, "Mom! What do you want? I'm on the phone!" I would hear her say, "Oh, ok, honey." Once after I had seated myself in front of my computer, the sound of her voice had startled me and I jumped out of my chair, lost my balance, and almost took a headlong dive into the nearby wall. I then flew down the stairs to yell, "Mom! I almost just killed myself! I just saw you and we just talked! Why are you calling for me again?" She insisted that she honestly didn't remember, and she apologized.

She typically called for me to do things like adjust her blanket by an inch or two or help her with the remote control to find CBS, the only station she would watch even if football or something else she could care less about was playing. I knew she was lonely. And there were times she told me directly that she was lonely. But although senior centers and synagogues were plentiful, and our next-door neighbor had generously offered to spend time with her, she had no interest. She seemed to want only my undivided attention and loyalty, despite knowing she was being unrealistic. Not to mention stubborn.

I kept her pill box filled with her regular medication and supplements and her cancer medication, all of which I gave to her twice a day every day. She responded phenomenally well to the new cancer regimen, with such amazing tumor regression that she received a bear hug from the oncologist leading the trial. It also inspired a new project for my leukemia research that involved repurposing breast cancer treatments that both she and I had been treated with. But her cancer therapy had some rough side effects, including sudden diarrhea, nausea and vomiting. When constipation was a problem because she had taken too much antidiarrheal medicine, I had to withhold that

and instead give her MiraLAX. There were days when Montezuma took some serious revenge and she missed the commode, and some days when I couldn't see in the dark corner what was on the floor and stepped in it, in bare feet.

There was a string of days when her nausea and vomiting weren't controlled by the antiemetics that had up until then been working. I was scolded by the head nurse when she learned that I had given my mother a higher dose of an antiemetic than what was prescribed, claiming that, even though the dose I was giving her was reported to be safe, she felt it still put her at risk of cardiotoxicity. She suggested I continue to use the same dose of antiemetic, which we knew wasn't working, and to call the nurse triage line if there were problems. I thought about the times the clinical trial nurses had given my mother cancer medicine either on an empty stomach or without antiemetics at the hospital and this had caused her to vomit repeatedly when she was driven home. I wrote a Terminator style email to the head nurse and reminded her of this and the fact that my mother's grade 3 or 4 vomiting episodes were putting her heart health at a much higher risk than a higher dose of antiemetic and that their handling of this was negligent and putting my mother in harm's way. In response to this, my mother was prescribed a new medicine, olanzapine, in addition to the antiemetics she was already taking, and she no longer had issues with vomiting.

We tried to carry on as normal, with the help of my mother's transport chair and walker, with restaurant visits, occasional dinners at home with guests, and takeout. I had gotten into the habit of giving her all her medications and supplements each morning, and she would often say, "This is like a meal." She would sometimes scare the hell out of me by saying "I can't get it down!" and seem like she was on the verge of choking. My husband said that she curiously never did this when he had to be the one to give her the medication. In the mornings, before going to work, I would make sandwiches that I would leave near her bedside. I always kept a bowl stocked with snacks that were within arm's reach, and it was around this time that she developed a passion for Devil Dogs.

"That you, El?" I would hear her calling to me each night when I walked through the door of the kitchen. Her television was usually on, and she had typically just eaten something my husband prepared for dinner unless I was home to make it for her. Sometimes I'd sit on the edge of her bed and talk with her, and other times, when I was feeling tired, I just said, "have a good night, ma," and "I love you" and walked upstairs.

"I love you too, sweetheart," she would say.

So, we continued to make it happen. But if I had to be completely honest, I felt like I was filling a dog bowl for a pet every time I left her a sandwich to go to work. And her hygiene was poor despite us giving her a sponge bath a couple of times a week, and her toenails had become Guinness World Records qualifying in length.

One of my less proud moments was when an assessment nurse visited the house, pointed toward my mother's feet, and began to shame me for the condition of her toenails. She insisted that I needed to get my mother a referral from her primary care physician for a specialist.

It was 79 A.D. in Pompeii and Herculaneum all over again. My mouth suddenly erupted with lethal and fiery venom that had been unknowingly brewing inside me for months. Before my brain could take accountability, crazed words started to fly out of me into the Febrezed air around my mother's bed.

"You're a nurse, right?" I started. "And you're here, in our home. You say my mother needs her toenails to be trimmed. Why can't you trim them?" I knew I was being absurdly unrealistic, as my mother's toenails had reached the point of needing not just a podiatrist but a blowtorch and chainsaw. Still, I couldn't stop myself.

She laughed. "I know that you know I can't do that. You know that's not what I'm here for."

"Look, we can't get help for my mother!" I yelled. "I tried to get her a doctor's referral for her toenails two or three weeks ago and no one ever got back to me!"

"You have to calm down," the nurse said.

I stared at her.

"We're both adults here, right?" she said.

I stared at her some more.

"There's no reason why we can't discuss this as one adult to another," she said.

The pyroclastic flow began.

"I'm trying to give you some background!" I hollered. "I'm telling you this so you can understand our situation!"

She stared down at the floor, smirking.

"When we've asked for in-home services, we were forced to pay out the ass for nothing! Or if it didn't cost too much it still amounted to a big nothing!"

The nurse continued smirking and not saying anything.

I continued. "Palliative or end-of-life hospice wouldn't go near my mother because she was on a 'life-saving' medication, and they also didn't want their precious childbearing aged staff to risk being around someone on chemotherapy and after weeks of phone calls back and forth the hospice director completely ghosted me! When we placed her in an assisted living facility, the cost was high enough for us to need to take out a second mortgage on our home and contemplate prostitution or drug dealing just to afford it! We're talking $7,500 a month for lousy food and shitty care!"

The nurse rolled her eyes. She then scribbled a few things on a pamphlet and handed it to me. "Here are some numbers for services for you to try." She then pivoted to face my mother, who was in her bed. "I've seen people get upset, but this was the worst," she said to my mother.

"The worst? Really?" I followed her into the kitchen. "Well let me tell you, it goes both ways and I've never met anyone so patronizing in my life!" I yelled, "I've been trying to explain things to you, and all you've done is roll your eyes and smirk!" I supposed I was having another "Karen" moment.

She quietly let herself out. I never saw her again.

My husband set my mother up with a friend of his who was a podiatrist. Her appointment was a couple of days later. No referral was required.

I noticed my mother was short of breath a lot when I took her out of the house for drives. She called out for me late one night after everyone had gone to sleep, and I ran down the stairs to see what was wrong.

"I can't breathe," she said.

I had heard her say this several times before.

"Should we take you to the emergency room?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'm OK. I'm OK now."

This was the same answer she had also given me in the past.

I thought about the moaning sounds she had started making several months before this, when she was eating or taking steps to her commode. I had asked her if she was in any pain.

"No, I'm not," she said.

"You're making sounds like you are, though," I said.

"I'm OK."

She had also started talking to us with a shrill, theatrical voice that made her sound like she was extremely sick and weak. I had habitually reminded her to "use her strong voice." Her response every time was to immediately readjust her pitch and tone and sound like her regular self.

Looking back, it pains me to admit that "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" came to mind with a lot of my mother's habits and complaints. I wasn't sure how much was genuine and how much of it was wanting attention.

A routine visit to her primary care physician the day after her late-night shout out about having breathing problems gave me the answer. She was taken to the emergency room because of very low oxygen levels. The doctors diagnosed her with interstitial lung disease, which may or may not have been pneumonitis from the clinical trial medicines. There was also some cancer detected in her lungs. She had been placed on supplemental oxygen. Because of her condition, she was removed from the clinical trial.

The hospital visit was the first of several over the next nine months. She was placed in a short-term wing at a rehabilitation center, the same that they had placed her in a couple of years earlier that she was thrown out of for acting like a delinquent. She was told she would get physical therapy there to help her re-learn how to stand and walk, and then she would be able to go home.

Nurses at both the hospital and rehab mentioned that she called out for me all the time. Several staff had greeted me with "Are you the famous Ellen whose name we keep hearing?" When I visited, I sometimes heard her calling my name, but other times I just heard her crying out, "Help me!" When I asked her what she needed, she said, "Please help me!" or "Thank God you're here!" When I pressed her to tell me how I could help her, she said, "I don't know."

For several weeks, whenever I saw her, I found her in a state of panic. She looked up at me, whimpering and her eyes wide with fear.

"Oh, Ellen," she said, "You have no idea."

"What, ma?"

"You have no idea what I'm going through here," she said through labored breathing and sobs.

She described a male, black nurse as being the "head honcho" whose orders all the nurses followed. She described everyone as being "in on it" together. She said he had her on an examining table and while he didn't physically touch her, he told her she was "his." Her hysteria had become so relentless that we requested that the rehab find a replacement for Vito Corleone so we could remove at least one source of dread.

This worked.

For a while.

Then the hysterics started again. This could have been due to just about anything. She had been diagnosed with a UTI, but psychosis from the steroids she was

given for her lung inflammation, or anxiety from steroid withdrawal, may have been the culprits. My personal theory was that she had been taking the antipsychotic drug, olanzapine, for nausea and vomiting for many months and then it was abruptly discontinued when she was hospitalized. Anxiety, confusion, crying spells, depression, hallucinations, psychosis, restlessness and mood swings were on the list of olanzapine withdrawal symptoms.

When her lucidity returned, she expressed how much she wanted to go home. I told her that the only way for us to make that happen was physical therapy and getting her to stand and walk again. The physical therapy nurse told me that my mother wasn't being cooperative and seemed to be in too much discomfort for her to feel physical therapy was appropriate. I, myself, tried to play hero and help my mother to stand up from a sitting position on her bed. Despite my mother trying very hard, it just wasn't happening. It became apparent that she would not be coming home.

We tried to find ways to make her happy. Nothing pleased us more than hearing her enthusiastically exclaim "Ooh!" when offered something as simple as a hamburger from a fast-food chain restaurant, or "Oh, does that sound good," when offered Chinese food or even just a Devil Dog.

My mother loved life, even when she was hating it. She thoroughly appreciated life's simple comforts and the fact that they helped her get through it. She had talked with me about how certain guilty pleasures preserved her sanity through tough times with her in-laws and other storms. This led to an accumulation of enough dresses, jewelry and handbags to fill ten department store warehouses.

I had wanted more than anything to keep her life as it always was, endearingly mundane with all her comforts to keep her going. But what I wanted and what fate had in store for her were two different things, and over time her interest in the things that once brought her joy waned. Material possessions had lost meaning to her, and with her failing eyesight and memory, it was all she could do to just get from one day to the next.

There was another emergency room visit. This time, she was in a coma-like state because the rehab had placed her on hard-hitting opioids that were coupled with her newest, sleep-inducing cancer medicine. I was so grateful to see her awakened and alert after she was essentially detoxed, however short-lived this was before she resumed the cancer medicine combined with milder opioids. I had about a fifty percent chance over the next couple of months of finding my mother in such a deep sleep that I couldn't awaken her. I remember the nurses also trying to wake her, by lightly tapping her cheeks and saying repeatedly, "Shelia! Come on, Sheila! Wake up!"

During those times when she was awake and able to carry on a conversation, I made sure I had the chance to tell her how much I loved her, that I loved her more than life itself, and how she was my favorite person in the whole world. I had a feeling that time was of the essence to express this.

I was my mother's healthcare proxy, and the medical community followed my decisions even if I had no idea what was up or down or right or wrong. Still, both a palliative care nurse and a geriatric specialist suggested hospice to me. My mother's oncologist had only reluctantly agreed to keep her on the newest cancer medicine for another month or two. I was in the minority in my thinking and plans, but I knew from talking with my mother that she would rather live than not. I knew what removing something stabilizing her cancer would mean.

Anything I thought or believed was moot the day my mother complained to me about a scratchy throat and asked me for a cough drop. An infection she caught, which was believed to be pneumonia, was the start of a steep, downward spiral for the next day or so. She had developed the most horrible sounding cough I'd ever heard and completely lost her voice. The nurses informed me that she wasn't eating or drinking anything, but that her vitals were good.

My husband and I visited her in her rehab in the middle of the day. He had asked her to squeeze my hand if she was thirsty, since she couldn't speak. Her eyes were open, and she looked horrified. Her arms were flailing but I could feel her forefinger and thumb pressing on my palm, and so I dropped an inch or so of water through a straw into her mouth.

After a few minutes of doing this, we suggested to the nurse who was taking care of her that she needed to be on IV fluids.

"But her vitals are good," the nurse said. "We need to have a reason to put her on IV."

My husband found a diplomatic but direct way to let the nurse know that we would rather not wait until her vitals were bad before getting her on IV.

The nurse called the doctor who apparently needed to approve of the request, and while the doctor eventually gave the green light for my mother to get IV fluids, we were told that there would be a delay for several hours. We decided to have my mother admitted to the hospital.

That day, my mother underwent a myriad of tests and was placed on IV fluids that included treatment with an antibiotic. In addition to hyperglycemia, kidney failure, low blood pressure, sepsis and MRSA, my mother's heart was failing and there was a large build up of fluid that was making it hard to get more IV lines into her. Her arms were covered in black and blue bruises.

We were told it did not look good for her.

I sat for a long time in my car in the emergency room parking lot. I had started the engine and meant to put my foot on the gas pedal, but I was frozen. The car radio was on as I continued to quietly sit. I noticed the song, "Oh Sheila," was playing, and I remembered thinking that was an interesting coincidence.

We received a phone call in the middle of the night from an ICU nurse. She told us that they were hoping she might show signs of improvement with the antibiotic, but that she was doing poorly, and they wanted to keep us informed. They described her as having been in a lot of pain, and so they started administering morphine.

We received another call from the nurse early the next day. We were told that my mother's condition had worsened during the night. Their plan was to keep her on medication to maintain an elevated blood pressure. They urged us to come to the ICU to see her as quickly as we could, and they would keep her on the blood pressure medicine only until we arrived.

I sat near my mother, and I held her hand and stroked her face. I watched as the time between breaths grew longer. There were times when she looked like her breathing had completely stopped, but then a few seconds later she drew another breath.

Her eyes opened, and I heard one of the nurses say to me, "She sees you." I cried and told her how much I loved her, and I continued holding her hand. I felt my

husband walk behind me and kiss me on the head. I saw her jaw clench, and soon after there were no more breaths. The nurse walked over to tell me she had passed. I remember looking down at her hand, puffy and swollen with fluid. The stillness of it reminded me of the porcelain hands of her antique dolls.

The following day, I noticed one of our bathroom lights flickering for a while, despite there being no loose bulb or signs of the light burning out. I remember within a day of my father passing, my mother and I had similarly seen a hall light flicker late at night, when we were both consoling each other. I wanted to believe that my mother, like my father, may have been paying a visit.

The funeral was held later in the week, after my mother was transported to Florida to be buried next to my father. I talked with the rabbi the day before over the phone to tell her about my mother, whom she had never met. I told her that I would consider giving a small eulogy, but I wasn't sure.

During the funeral, my brother and I had to wear a black ribbon and rip it, to symbolize the physical separation from the deceased loved one. My brother's ripped with no problem, while the one I was given had frayed edges that made it impossible to tear. The rabbi tried as well and failed and laughed nervously, saying that had never happened to her before. She found a different one that had intact edges, and I was able to successfully rip it slightly. While this was likely just the result of a poorly made brand of ribbons, I felt it was symbolic of my difficulty letting go.

Notably, a fox had slowly sauntered by in the middle of the service with some kind of dead animal dangling from its mouth. Foxes are supposedly notorious for digging holes near cemeteries. But foxes are also symbols of spirituality and the afterlife.

The rabbi found the fox amusing and asked if my mother had a sense of humor.

I answered, "Yes, she was quite the character."

I saw the foxtrot as my mother's last dance for us. But for this, she would need a partner. I smiled at the thought that she would now have my father.

I didn't prepare a formal eulogy but just stood up and started rambling. I talked about the unique bond between a mother and daughter, how horns would occasionally lock but it never took away from the closeness. And I mentioned how much it meant to me to have the honor of taking care of her after my father had passed.

She was my mother. And then she was my child.

And through it all, she was my best friend.
