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Alzheimer's Deals Another Painful Blow



The author and her mom, Vera Frampton, hold hands. (Photo: Pam Frampton)

*By: Pam Frampton
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Pam Frampton

SHE was resting on her twin bed when I visited, lifting a corner of the blanket and motioning for me to lie down beside her in the stiflingly warm room.

I suspect she just wanted to feel a human being next to her after a decade of being alone.

"It's OK, I'll go on if you are having a nap," I say.

"I'm glad you came. It's nice to have someone to talk to," she says, her eyes half-closed, oblivious to the presence of her roommate nearby.

"Well, I can certainly stay for a while." She reaches for my hand then, and I feel her baby-soft skin, notice the pronounced blue veins threading her fingers like strands of wool beneath the surface.

And then I notice something else. Her rings are gone. The four rings she always wore: wedding and engagement rings to mark 62 years of marriage. A family ring representing her offspring, and a sapphire and diamond ring my dad gave her once for no special occasion — which, in itself, rendered it a special occasion.

They were going to be family heirlooms — "one for each of my girls," she used to say — precious keepsakes to pass down through generations.

To see them missing was a shock. I had never seen her take them off and, given the pronounced veining in her hands, imagined they would have been difficult to remove.



"Mom, what happened to your rings?" I asked, aware as soon as the words left my mouth that she would be unable to tell me.

"What?" she asked. "Never mind." I poked through her jewelry box and nightstand, trying to tamp down my panic so it wouldn't spread to her.

No rings. On the way home, I called my two sisters. Neither could remember if she had been wearing the rings on Mother's Day. None of the photos we had taken showed her hands.

Later, I went through all the photos on my cellphone and they did the same. The most definitive evidence we found were pictures from her birthday in September, when the rings were all there.

Eight months ago. I knew then she'd never see them again. That's when the guilt kicked in. Why hadn't we noticed sooner? Why didn't we check her hands at each visit? Why didn't I take the rings for safekeeping before her Alzheimer's advanced?

There are logical answers to all these questions, but they don't quash the feelings of blame.

I didn't take the rings from her because they were, quite simply — besides the clothes in her closet — all that she had; the last vestiges of her autonomy as an adult. They were hers, gifts given to her, symbols that would tie her to us and our late father to the end.

Or so we'd thought. The thing about dementia is you can't be held accountable for your actions. If Mom's hearing aids weren't working and she took them out and laid them down somewhere and they got lost, you can't fault her for that.

Dentures, the same. Glasses, ditto. And she has lost all those things over the past few years.

But she has never lost her rings, her pride and joy, tangible things that reminded her she was valued and loved, even if she didn't always remember herself.

You sit and think about every possible scenario until it makes you heartsick — some so dark you don't even want to consider them.

You mourn how vulnerable people like my sweet and gentle mother are. Memories stolen, robbed of dignity, rendered gullible by their affliction and reliant on the goodness of strangers.

I remember when I realized I'd have to take her credit card from her for her own financial protection. She was an easy target for phone scammers and slick sales pitches, and though it made me feel incredibly sad, I knew she didn't have money to waste.

I had never wanted this role-reversal, the child trying to protect the mother.

But my siblings and I did try to protect her in every way we could.

It came as a blow, with the discovery of her missing jewelry, the knowledge that we can't protect her from her failing memory, nor other human frailties.

She is at the mercy of the world now, weak as a kitten; unable to safeguard herself in any way.

As her adult child, I feel helpless. On my father's deathbed, we promised him we'd look after Mom.

I feel like I've let them both down. Oh I know rings are just possessions, that they can't compare to the strength of the love and blood that bind us. But there's just something about seeing those soft and fragile bare hands that makes me want to weep.

alzheimer.mb.ca/



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