

What Rises to the Surface

The third time my mother and I are at the clinic waiting for her name to be called, I realize that what we will talk about from now on are the three miscarriages she had before I was born and her trip to Europe before that.

I know about the trip—those two months in a VW Bug in the 60s, how she and her friend, Patty, accidentally rented a room in a brothel, how the castles all began to look alike. I had sat and looked at the slides projected on a white sheet stretched across a room years ago. Those same years when I slouched in my desk, viewing murky maps of Africa and Asia displayed on a screen in my geography class.

But the miscarriages are new to me, suddenly mentioned for the first time. She almost lost me early in the second month; I had heard about how her doctor had prescribed a medication to help the placenta better attach, how I was her “miracle.” But the other lost children had not been discussed. Now they are a topic of conversation, the only one besides Europe that she falls back on.

I try discussing anything else, even the weather, and how the two recent ice storms have forced all of us to tread carefully. But nothing works. She gives a curt reply and then pauses and then returns to one of these two stories.

I wonder about what matters.

My mother has been diagnosed with MCI—Mild Cognitive Impairment. We have been told that 50% of those diagnosed with it will remain as they are while the other half will progress into Alzheimer’s. Progress used to possess positive connotations for me. Now, not so much.

The diagnosis came after two years of her struggling with memory. She wouldn’t know what day it was and at least twice she had gotten lost going from here to there, there to here. I encouraged her, sometimes nagged her, to talk with her general practitioner and she said she had. But it wasn’t until she was hospitalized for an infection in the cartilage of her ear, that

appointments with specialists were made. Four days spent in Short Stay convinced both her nurses and doctors that something wasn't right.

A CT Scan, an MRI, cognitive tests were done. And this is what they found: that parts of my mother's brain are shrinking, pulling away from the skull, going dark.

Despite the news, she asserts she recalls everything from years ago, but when I phone her, asking for the name of a neighbor we had when I was a girl—the one who kept chickens in her kitchen—she has to ask my stepfather. Most of it is flotsam—short term and long term. It makes a brief appearance and then disappears.

I have to remind her that she went to Colorado at least twice—once with her cousin, well before me. And Nashville with her parents. And what that one doctor instructed her to do that one day she went to Urgent Care because she “didn't feel quite right.”

I am told not to grow impatient and chastise her for repeating herself. I should never say, “You said that already.” I am to keep an eye on her and mark if she mentions getting lost again. Keeping notes—for both her benefit and mine—is fine; it isn't cheating.

I am waiting for the day when she doesn't remember who I am.

I find that my own memory catches on the miscarriages. Why is it that out of all my mother's memories from her nearly 75 years of life, they surface again and again? Because she cannot recall that she already told me about them? Across a small table in the hospital over lunch, between appointments. In a waiting area with a view of two parking lots. In an examination room, seated side by side one another, as we wait for the neurologist. And so, even if I talk with her about the pain of those losses, that conversation never really happened for her. The story has to be told again, like that of her trip to Europe.

Which I get. It was the only time she left the United States. She set out before marriage, before motherhood, and tooled around six countries with no set itinerary. Just the first reservation and the last. And my mother was not wild. She had no time for the counter culture, for hippies with their unwashed hair and beads. She was more like Don Draper, minus the

alcohol and infidelity. Touring Europe for two months would leave a mark. And the trip was a success, and so it stands as a good memory.

The loss of three children? Is that recollection some kind of balance, counter weight?

Something that keeps her from tipping into happy nostalgia?

I have a tendency to recall the bad, which isn't good. Maybe I inherited this from her, although I don't think so. When she used to talk of her childhood and adolescence in rural Minnesota, the tales were cheerful. There was ice skating in the flooded field near her house, playing hide and go seek, boisterous Christmas gatherings at her grandmother's, dances at the VW club.

The death of her father when she was two years old was mentioned, but not dwelled on. Those dances with the veterans because she wasn't pretty enough to be asked by the cute guys, glossed over. If there was unhappiness and it was recalled, one didn't grouse about it.

When I was growing up, she would assert, "Life isn't fair and then you die." I once used that line in a story, commenting on how hearing it repeatedly might shape a person.

What I understand of the assertion in relation to her now, is that she may not have been happy much and that her mortality loomed. But she dealt with both. She made a conscious decision to recall the memories that brought her joy and forged on. Some of us call that compartmentalizing.

Maybe, then, there are other memories for her. Ones she doesn't discuss in waiting rooms. But how am I to know? All I have to go on is what she says—what she elects to share and what answers she gives to the questions we ask.

The first and second cognitive tests are administered by one of the nicest RNs I have ever met, Melissa. Her patience is admirable, even more so when I see it start to fracture the second time she meets with my mother and me.

There is a worksheet. Follow a convoluted path of numbers and letters. Draw a three dimensional cube. Tell me what this animal is, here. Repeat back to me the words truck, desk, violin, green...

My mother's score is half what it should be the first time. A giraffe is a zebra. That shade of a Granny Smith lost.

And then come the questions I think unfair.

Do you like to go out and socialize? Do you feel that life is hopeless? (Depends on what novel I'm currently reading and who I might socialize with.) (Yes, given the news.) But, she can't answer in these ways, the ways I would. There are only two options: yes or no. Talk about binaries.

The first time, her answers were always positive, showing little signs of depression, while the second time, they aren't. Come to find out, yes, she regretted some of her past decisions. She wasn't asked to elaborate, but that score comes out differently, as do the results of her worksheet.

This second time, her score has improved by four points. Melissa says the medication is probably helping my mother focus better. Maybe, too, she is less tired than she was the first time.

Melissa leaves the room to consult with someone on the team. My mother and I sit, staring at the door. She tells me she probably should not have married my stepfather. They married in 1978. It is now 2017. Do the math regarding that particular regret. What is the appropriate response? No wonder the answers can only be yes or no.

Call it self-absorption, but it's difficult to not walk away from these visits and consider your own life. Age, too, matters. Even with our continual increased life expectancy, I am middle aged.

I silently and quickly rattle off answers to those more difficult questions posed to my mother as I sit beside her in the examination room. Later, I mull them over. And wonder what my responses would say about me, what score I would receive. Is there anything I regret that would wipe out as many years as hers? If I had taken that job instead of this job? Move there instead of here? The whole landscape of the last twenty years of my life would look different. How could it not? There's nothing new in this. And what good does it do?

And, here, in those lines, I recognize I sound just like my mother.

This is where I tell you that my mother and I have always had a strained relationship, particularly strained when I did/do not act as she wished/wishes. There's something called conditional love and I know something about it.

Even before the MCI diagnosis, she would initially get very angry and then pretend as if whatever I had done that made her unhappy or disappointed in me had not happened. Another form of compartmentalizing.

All this matters because I am now collecting my mother from where she lives twenty minutes from where I do and driving her to her appointments and sitting in on those appointments and trying to come to some understanding with her of what her future will look like. I am her only child and her relationship with my stepfather is strained, as well. I am on deck.

When it happens to come up that we share the same birthday, nurses and doctors alike ooh and aah. They see a bond that exists, yes, but not to the extent they assume. We do not correct their assumptions.

We may love our parents and our children, but we may not always like them. We may do what we do partly out of duty. Not entirely, no. Also, a memory of more.

Six months later, on her birthday, I give her a bouquet of cut *Alstroemeria*. She talks of planting it in her garden, once the ground warms and softens.

One month after that, I am sitting across from her, after having waited in line for two salads and two bottles of water. She says, “I had three miscarriages before you.” And I say, “That must have been awful.” She asks, “Have I told you about when Patty and I ended up accidentally renting a room in a brothel?” And I say, “You did? Really?”

Six months later—after my stepfather has died—her scores drop enough that her neurology team diagnoses her with mild dementia—the first stage of Alzheimer’s.

Wednesday afternoons are now filled with errands: taking her to get her hair cut, pushing the grocery cart while she mulls over the ground coffee options, helping her balance her checkbook.

Sundays I take her to and pick her up from church and then have her over for dinner. Most days include her calling and then hanging up on me.

I read that we are on “the cusp of an epidemic,” although the social worker on my mother’s team, Barb, says we’re already in it. She recommends I

begin touring memory care units and put my mother's name on a couple waiting lists. Everything begins to shift again.

Here is a memory: My mother and I are driving back from western Minnesota, after visiting her parents. I am six years old. She has had a migraine for two days. Over the five-hour drive, I have regularly crawled into the back seat and rubbed her shoulders to alleviate the pain. The repetitive action makes my hands ache, but I continue. As we near the Minnesota-Wisconsin border, the bluffs rear their heads. We descend into the valley and recognize we are nearly home.