

Her Mother

by Connor Southard

Though the old woman's life was over, Allison did not have many true memories of her mother. There were the recycled images of an aproned woman ironing, scolding, gardening, baking, sitting alongside her laughing father. He was in a bowling league; she knitted and gabbed with friends. As a married couple, they were simply so average, so like all of Allison's suburban friends' suburban parents, that she had never understood just how much true affection they had. They had only the two children, and her brother was a bit of a rebel in his day, finally reaching a cool truce with the family around the time he began to study engineering after a year of smoking pot and writing bad song lyrics. Allison was quiet, and did what she was told to do or expected to be told to do.

The only truly vivid memory Allison had of her mother came when Allison was a timid eight years old and had just scraped her knee on the edge of the old cedar patio on which her father had smoked and drank Jim Beam and where the neighborhood kids occasionally raised hell. It wasn't much of a scrape, and Allison was old enough that she didn't wail for effect. Still, tears had come to her eyes as her mother calmly slid open the screen door and glided out, flower-print apron ruffling and black hair falling before her eyes.

Allison's mother didn't chide her for carelessly falling, didn't give any hint of being alarmed, didn't say anything at all for a moment. She merely looked the young girl in her teary eyes, pressed a terrycloth to the scratch, and kissed her on the forehead with a softness that Allison remembered even now, thirty-odd years later, as being divine.

"Allison..." She said it softly.

Allison's eyes dried, and she didn't utter another squeak.

Breathing before her now, her breaths mewling, was that same woman, her black hair now a mat of grey that the

nurses let run wilder than they should. But she couldn't shoulder off much more responsibility than that on these women, whose lives were choreographed in frantic lungings between rooms and patients, many of whom were simply growing more waxen and less human each day, regardless of how they might intervene. Allison signed all the papers and bills that were placed in front of her, and so the state of Ohio was sure that she was her mother's guardian, as was the Internal Revenue Service and the dour Dr. Simkey, who had only once taken the time to frown over a medical chart at Allison and tell her that her mother's coma was, in all likelihood, "intractable." He had said it greyly, too tired and too old himself to pretend that he cared that another lump of wax had been made the ward of another sad-looking woman in her thirties or forties.

The Hospital in which she now sat was the kind of building that had been the staid backdrop to her years growing in up her parent's cul-de-sac home in Milton; a concrete chunk with window hewn into it and ample parking room for the pick-up trucks, SUVs and family sedans that populated the roads of this half-wooded, half-subdivided county. Her mother had ended up here after a long, predictable decline, at the end of which the health insurance company – a hold-over from her long-dead father's pension plan with one of the rusting automakers – had sent her to this hospital because the beds were cheap and it was a fairly clean place to die. That was the way Allison thought of it now, allowing herself some cynical wit to counterbalance the needling feeling of disempowerment that seemed to seep out of the walls of the place.

There would be no chance for her to stroke or reassure her mother, no kiss that could mend or dry tears, or even calm her rattling breaths. But, just like that day on the old patio, she owned her mother in every sense of the word, and supposed that it was to her to be as sentimental, gentle and careful as she knew how with the woman whose hair had once fallen before her eyes because she was

moving through life, not because she was sliding off the edge of it.

Looking down at the twilight of a life, she wondered about the rules as she had always known them. Her mother had left the kitchen on that July day, left a roast to dry in the plastic-paneled oven, and come to kiss her softly. Sitting by her mother's bedside, she could only knead her hands and stare, listening to the breathing. Occasionally, she would reach out and touch her mother's gown or her gnarled, lifeless hand, its veins like a blue henna etching beneath the sallow skin. When she did this, she felt only her own powerlessness, and how crushing this reversal was; the helpless mother and the daughter powerful in signature and checkbook only. These were the only times when visiting her mother made her truly angry, in that pained childish way that can only come when one has the sense of having been ironically and cruelly cheated.

She had been cheated not of more faint and worrying time with the old woman her mother had for too long been, but of the luxury – the dear graceful luxury – to not have to make a decision about anyone's life. She couldn't remember really making a decision about a life - certainly not her own. She had gone through all the expected motions quietly. Now she had someone breathing before her, something that would have to be dealt with, and perhaps even cared for.

A little less than a year ago, Allison and her brother had kept watch together over their mother. The vigil had lasted only half an hour, her well-heeled brother in his charcoal gray slacks and polished wingtips constantly shifting his weight and fidgeting, anxious either to get back to his work with steep trusses or to attend to any one of the needs of his sprightly and talkative young children, a little boy and girl of immense imagination. Their mother wouldn't let them anywhere this hospital. She didn't want them to think that a grandmother, or anyone, should look like this.

After a few mumblings, her brother finally said something meaningful.

"I really don't know what I'm supposed to say." Peter felt that he could be glib with Allison. She was, after all, a quiet person. "As long as the pension keeps paying for it, we can leave her here. We can visit her, but there's no sense getting worked up about it." He was clearly conflicted about speaking so insensitively about their mother, and he kept moving his hands from his pockets to his elbows, folding his arms defensively. But he meant what he said. He either didn't have the time or the energy to do what Allison now did, and she had a difficult time blaming him.

"Peter...I don't know..." And she didn't.

She had called him to the hospital because she was hoping he would do something wildly unpredictable, like demand a surgeon revive his mother or that she be given a better room. The would-be muscular voice she remembered from her childhood would have something to say that she hadn't already numbly considered, wouldn't it?

It didn't. And Allison let him walk out to his car, his thickened shoulders tense and ignorant, without another word. She remained standing, biting her lip weakly and finally letting herself fall into one of the over-padded chairs. She couldn't remember when she had finally arisen, but it must have taken at least another drab hour.

Once or twice during a visit, nurses would visit her mother's bedside and make a curt show of checking tubes, wires and instruments. This was their quaint version of Allison's brief bedside sits; they paid their relatively smaller share of time to this comatose woman, doing what little was necessary to keep her breathing. In turn, Allison worked at keeping her mother alive as a human idea, acting as the one person in whose mind she was still alive.

"Honey, you need anything?"

A kind nurse, an older black woman, had asked her this once as she sat with her mother. It wasn't her duty, but she was motivated by what Allison had guessed was the pity that she must inspire, so quiet at the side of one of the patients who never made any noise on the ward.

Allison had thought just then, "I need nothing you can give me." It was a bold, direct thought, and it was not the sort of thought that often crossed Allison's docile mind. She only smiled faintly and shook her head at the gentle woman, too stunned by her own psychic bluntness to do anything else.

"Alright then. I'll just leave you two alone." And a smile.

Perhaps she was after that; alone. Alone with her mother, without anyone else to taunt her with their movements and the ease with which they moved around the slumbering woman and the sitting woman, she was best able to pretend to that her relationship with her mother was loving, and heartfelt, and genuine.

She hadn't ever decided to stop loving her mother, but there was no doubt that it had happened. A slow progression of years, most likely, and their relationship had slipped from friendly, to dilatory and filled with corrections and headaches over the older and older woman on the part of the nervous younger woman. Now, this; the coma, only the breathing between them, and she couldn't lie to herself. She got a little sick every time she had to think of this thing in the bed as her mother. Trying to love her now would be to create a myth and nurture it, and she could barely nurture what was real.

She first thought of ending her mother's life as she drove the brief distance between Lake Loudon and Milton. It was a pitted and overdriven stretch of Ohio road, surrounded by tired looking woods and lacking the attention it needed from the state road crews. Her Japanese sedan was easy to drive, the radio was sterile, and there was nothing to stand between her and thoughts of a mother so nearly dead that visiting her made Allison feel already old.

On one of the many jarring drives, on a bleak evening in midweek, she found herself focusing on the tubes and machines. They surrounded her mother like a disinterested tangle of vines, growing ever more complex and sinister, beginning to swallow her without a fight. The

helpless flesh on the bed was becoming less and less the dominant relief of the morbid artwork of that room.

What would it be to rip apart this artifice, and let her mother's breaths come to the soft halt that they would have long ago without so much chaining them down?

She drove with real intention because the stretch of road ahead of her was graded better than the other bits, and it was a straight and simple drive from this point to the hospital in Milton, and the room where her mother lay, waiting to be liberated from the flatness of her existence.

When she reached the side of the bed, all that purpose melted away. She remembered her mother's gentle authority, the subtle signs of affection that, distant as they were and made generic by time and misremembrance, made her still a living presence in Allison's imagination. There was still that spark, the remembered fragments of a woman whose hair had not been fallow and limp, whose breaths were either sharp and focused or steady and patient. Though she now lacked all of that verve and the smell of affection for which Allison had loved her, she was still linked forever back to the idea of that woman, shards and snapshots of whom Allison now called her mother.

One day she had stood for a minute or two in the pouring rain outside the hospital before making her way inside. No umbrella and no jacket; let the water do what it could. She soaked herself deeply, closed her eyes and thought of turning again to the rough road and never coming back. Drenched as she was, the rain feeling of the willing freshness of a warm Ohio Spring, she didn't feel clean. She saw her mother in every moment she stood there, hovering just behind her eyelids and breathing monotonously, her own eyes forever closed, atrophying behind the wrinkled skin and turning from azure to ashen grey with yellowy veins. Allison mimicked her mother's stillness, and forgave herself a moment of pure lust, hunger for the time when there would be no breathing to draw her in from the rain.

She wanted only the will to do something to quench that breathing. But when she thought of this, her mind filled

with some weak fear as blank as the walls of the hospital room. Sometimes she would reach out towards the cords and wires that could be snatched at to end a life, and even touch them lightly with her finger tips, only to crumple back down into her seat, uncertain.

On a gray day, a day in which she had been altogether left alone by the nurses and the doctors and even the maintenance men since she had received her plastic-coated "visitor" badge, Allison sat in the sterile brown chair on the side of her mother that housed more of the cord and screens and boxes and tubes than the other – what might have been her right side. Here her back was against the windowpanes and the sad Venetian drapes, which let in only a smattering of unfriendly light on this evening, though it was late spring and the sun would be in the sky for a few more hours. On this gray day, she received the slip of paper from Doctor Simkey – his wrinkled forehead beaded with stately sweat, his flannel tie beneath the white coat so absurd and humanly lovable – that reminded her that she was her mother's keeper.

It was a legal certificate of some sort or another, and she assumed it was an update to the contracts and notaries she had already signed. In the first clause, which she had only skimmed, it made mention of her "custodial responsibility" for her mother, as though the old woman were a banana peel to be cleaned from the floor. She hadn't smiled at this, nor had she yet signed the document, which floated now in her unremarkable left hand, which rested on her crossed knees, her worn business khakis perfectly smooth and light.

With her right hand, she rummaged in her brown purse for a ballpoint pen, and imagined how she would sign such a flimsy thing without tearing it. She didn't want to tear it, of that she was certain. Her mother would go on breathing, and she would continue to sit, mindful of the breaths that now seemed to pass through her, her mother's phantom caress.

Afterword

Featured Principles

Chiefly, this story concerns itself with what is known as the “endowment effect.” Simply put, the endowment effect occurs when an individual values something at an relatively overblown level simply because one owns it.

In the case of poor Allison, she does more or less own her mother. Of course, one always has affection for one’s family members, and there is value in this distinction, but Allison acknowledged that she does not really “love” her mother any more, even if she doesn’t exactly despise her. She sees pulling the plug as the right thing to do, and she has no moral qualms about that idea. However, as the story pushes towards what might be guessed to be a climactic act of gentle homicide on the part of Allison, we are instead left with a woman who receives a simple piece of paper reminding her that her mother belongs to her. She is reminded of her ownership of her mother, and the accompanying sense of emotional attachment leads her away from a course of action that every fiber of her being seems to desire. The endowment effect – triggered by a mere piece of paper – has taken hold.

As well, there is an obvious theme of general uncertainty running through this story. While Allison is not clearly displaying irrationality in her wishy-washiness, she is extremely uncertain and seemingly unable to make a decision and make a final weighing of costs and benefits. This problem addresses another basic problem with neatly modeled assumptions about rational economic decisions: we are terrible at both figuring out what it is that we want, and perhaps even worse at acting on it if we have some idea. Allison is held back by emotional and intellectual strictures, and she is a far cry from a rational economic actor.

About the Author

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