



Judith Ford

Chronos

Thursday afternoon. 3:15. I sat in my Subaru minivan in front of Lake Bluff Elementary School as children of all sizes bubbled out of the school doors, making chirping sounds like human birds. After a few minutes my seven-year-old son Nic separated from the crowd and ran, his heavy Garfield backpack bouncing on his back, to my car. He thrust the rear door open and, grunting with unnecessary drama, pulled himself into the backseat.

Nic was a clumsy puppy of a kid who hadn't grown into his big feet and hands. He was intellectually miles beyond his cohort and socially eons behind them. As a result, I was probably his only reliable friend.

"We're going to visit Grandma," I reminded him as he clicked his seat belt on.

He groaned. "Do we have to?"

My mother had had a disastrous stroke four years ago and had ended up in a Title 19 nursing home, The Shores, a substandard facility that was all we could provide for her. After six weeks in the hospital, in the ICU and eventually in rehab, she had remained paralyzed on her entire left side, couldn't use her left hand, arm, or leg. She couldn't walk, not even with a walker, couldn't move herself in or out of bed or on or off a toilet, and could only sit up in a wheelchair if she was strapped into it. She needed 24/7 skilled nursing care wherever she lived. No one in our family could even come close to paying for that kind of care even if we'd been willing (which neither my brother nor I were) to have our mother live in one of our houses. We also couldn't afford a really good nursing home. The only way to get an even marginal nursing home for her was for my father to apply for welfare.

Just before my mother was to be released from the hospital, I drove my father to the county welfare office, where he reluctantly filled out the forms for nursing home funding. He'd wanted better for her, he kept telling me on the way home. He wished he could just take her back to their condo and take care of her himself. Which was utterly out of the question. He could barely breathe and couldn't walk across his own living room without stopping to catch his breath. Even eating was hard for him.

Every day for two years after my mother entered The Shores, my father had driven his ancient, rattling Ford Falcon the twenty miles from his condo to her room, despite his impaired vision (macular degeneration) and end-stage emphysema.

"There is no way your father should still be alive," his doctor told me back then. "It defies all reason."

"He's staying alive to visit my mother every day," I told the doctor.

"But he shouldn't even be driving anymore," said the

doctor.

“I know,” I told him. I’d been in the car for one of my dad’s drives. Even on a major highway he never drove faster than twenty miles per hour. It was a miracle he hadn’t killed himself or anyone else.

My father finally stopped driving, stopped looking after my mother, just two weeks before he died. After that his wife’s well-being was totally in the hands of the overburdened nursing home staff and my busy brother and me.

In the two years since then, I’d visited my mother three times every week, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturday or Sunday, while also working full time and doing, I suspected, a rather inadequate job of monitoring my two teenage girls and my odd-duck son Nic.

On Thursdays I took Nic with me to the nursing home partly to avoid handing him off to another after-school sitter but also because his presence lightened the mood, lightened *my* mood, and made my mother and the other nursing home captives smile.

“Why do we have to go?” Nic whined from the backseat.

“You know why. Grandma will be very sad if we don’t. She gets so lonely.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“I don’t either, Nic, but if we don’t go, I’ll feel worse than if we do.”

“I won’t,” he mumbled.

“I know,” I told him, as I caught a glimpse of his pouting face in the rearview mirror. I understood how he felt. When I was around Nic’s age, I routinely made mandatory visits to my own grandmother’s nursing home. I remembered how, as my mother and I walked down the hall to Nana’s room, all the old people slumped over in their wheelchairs followed me with hungry eyes. Sometimes they reached for me with shaking, bony hands. At Nic’s age, I didn’t realize they did that because they were glad to see me, that I was refreshment for them, a novelty. I thought they wanted to clutch me, hug me too tightly, maybe eat me. I’d cling to my mother’s hand and try to hide behind her legs until we were safe by Nana’s bed.

I didn’t much like spending time in my mother’s nursing

home now either. Every time I visited her I left feeling impotent, trapped in a role that reminded me of my childhood, when I'd believed I was supposed to make my depressed mother happy. Which of course I couldn't do. I was a kid. Now, again, even though I knew there was little to nothing I could do to ease her suffering, I still felt like I should be able to.

As Nic and I drove the fifteen minutes from his school to The Shores, I reminded myself to be patient: patient with Nic, which wasn't generally hard, and patient with my mother, which *was* generally hard. I was sad that she was half paralyzed and living in a marginal nursing home. Of course I was sad. But I was also annoyed.

Do something, anything, other than just lie there and watch videos like "Baby Animals" and "Grumpy Old Men," I thought during my worst moments. *Even after a stroke a person can be somewhat proactive, can't they?* It seemed so dangerous for her not to take charge of her health. And so hard on me. I was a *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* type and had purchased that book's spin-off, *7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, so that in a few years, when Nic was in middle school, he would already have learned how to organize himself for success too. I'd conquered my own depressive brain chemistry by taking up distance running. I was happy with my life—or I had been before my mother's stroke pulled me back into the family I'd intentionally distanced myself from. I would be happy again. I knew I would. The sooner my mother got to work on her recovery, I thought, the sooner I'd be happy again.

As Nic and I walked off the elevator on 3 North, my mother's floor in The Shores, Josephine, a short, skinny woman with runny eyes, zipped down the hallway toward us in her wheelchair. I put a protective arm against Nic's chest and pushed him gently against the wall to let Josephine pass. She zipped up and down this hallway a lot. She propelled her chair down the hall with her right foot, her left resting on the footrest, going surprising—and sometimes alarming—speeds.

"Gotta get in shape," Josephine told everyone every time she flew by. "I'm gonna go home soon." A nurse had told me that Josephine, who had been there for four years, probably was *not*

going to go home soon. Probably she was never going to go home. Her house had been sold long ago, and no one in her family was able to take her in.

Next we walked past Helen's room. Helen, also in a wheelchair, liked to lurk in the doorway of her room, ready to attack passersby with word requests. Today Helen wore a faded housedress of indeterminate color, her gray hair wild and thin and standing out all around her ears. Her nose and her voice were equally sharp.

"Give me something to spell!" she shouted at us as we walked by. When neither Nic nor I answered, she spelled her own word. "F-O-W-B-M-E-N-T!" she shrieked belligerently. And in case we'd missed it, she repeated the letters at even higher volume. Nic suppressed a giggle until we were well past Helen. Then he was overcome.

"Fowbment?" he said, laughing hard. "What's a fowbment?"

My mother had told me she liked to give Helen hard words to spell, like "prism" or "asphalt." These made Helen swear. "Shit!" she'd shout. "Shit, shit, shit!"

"Then," my mother told me, "I like to say, okay, Helen, spell 'shit.' That makes her scream even more."

When we got to my mother's room today, the television was booming as usual. "HELLO!" I shouted at her, twice, before she heard me.

After three years of post-stroke rehab, my mother hadn't improved much. She'd had two smaller strokes after the first one, and while they hadn't worsened her motor skills, they had further dulled her brain. Or maybe the anti-anxiety and painkilling drugs had done that. Her short-term memory sucked. She could swallow, she could talk, but her conversations were usually concrete and repetitious. She still couldn't walk, dress herself, or go to the bathroom alone. The longer she was disabled, the less she tried to do for herself. She was sinking.

"Who is it?" she called back before turning away from *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* to look at us. "Oh. It's you guys. Goody. They've nearly killed me today."

"Oh yeah? Again?" I said without much interest. She told

me every day that the staff was trying to kill her. When asked why she answered, "It's because they think I'm a spoiled white lady." Or "I'm on to them; I'm the only one here who's with it enough to notice what they're doing." Or "They're all lazy, don't want to be bothered, and I bother them too much."

She might have been right about some of that. She pushed her call light button a lot and got ignored a lot. I'd witnessed it myself. There was no intercom system at The Shores. This had always struck me as strange, even cruel, perverse. You would think that here of all places, where people couldn't get up and go get the help they needed, there should be a two-way intercom system. If a resident was having chest pains or felt dizzy, they'd have to hit the call light and wait for someone to notice that the light over their door had turned on or that a tiny panel with their room number on it on a display in the nurse's station had lit up. Keep in mind that, often as not, no one was even *in* the nurse's station.

Sometimes when I was visiting, we would wait for half an hour for someone to come help my mother use her commode or get into her wheelchair. Sometimes it was even longer. I'd filed formal complaints with the Milwaukee County Department on Aging about the lack of cleanliness at The Shores and about these long wait times. The regulation, I'd learned, was that a call light had to be responded to as soon as possible and never longer than fifteen minutes. In fifteen minutes someone could die from a heart attack or from mucus stuck in his or her windpipe. I could reach my mother's bedside from my own bedside in a nearby suburb in fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes should have been plenty of time to answer a call light requesting help, but the nursing aides often took a lot longer.

Sometimes, when I got tired of waiting with my mother, I'd go down to the nurse's station and remind them of the regulation. "It's been thirty minutes," I would say. "This is inexcusable. You could lose your license for this."

The responses I got were all pretty similar: "We're understaffed today," "I'm moving as fast as I can, ma'am." Or, once from an aide who was more honest than the rest: "Your mama acts like everything is an emergency, like she's gonna die or something, when all she wants is one of us to reach her a tissue."

She shrieks like she's in terrible pain. I never be knowin' if what she wants is important or not."

To which I said, "It's all important to her. At least let her know you're on the way, even if you can't get there for a while." And, to that same aide on another similar occasion, "Yeah. I know. It drives me crazy too. Be patient. She's like a child." I didn't say, "Believe me, I know. I grew up with her." But I wanted to.

"Why don't they come?" my mother complained on this Thursday right after Nic and I walked into her room. Less than a minute had passed since she'd pushed the call button. "See what I have to put up with? I think I'll use my phone and call the front desk. And then you go out there and give 'em hell. Find out why they're ignoring your poor mother."

"Mom, it's only been one minute," I told her, irritated, trying not to be.

While I knew that her time sense had been damaged by the stroke, this behavior reminded of my childhood when my mother would retire to her bed with whatever illness she thought she had—and she had many—and would expect constant care. On her bedside table was a dome-shaped bell, the kind you often see on motel check-in counters beside a sign reading: *ring for service*. My mother rang for service often, and every time she did, one of us—my father, my brother, or me—would rush to her bedside to take care of whatever she needed. A glass of water, a tuna salad sandwich, a window she needed opened or closed. When I was Nic's age, I prided myself on how quickly I answered that bell and ran to get whatever my mother wanted. By the time I was a teenager though, I resented the damn bell and often ignored it.

"Let's give them an entire five minutes before we complain, okay?" I told my mother now.

She grinned a lopsided grin at me. Like a naughty child.

Her smile was uneven, partly from the paralysis remaining in the left side of her face but also from the absence of four of her lower teeth. For years she'd worn a removable bridge, but since the stroke she refused to wear it. The gaps in her smile, her perennially mussed hair (from sitting up in bed watching TV all day every day), plus having lost forty pounds during her months in the hospital following the first stroke—all these changes made her

look like a hybrid of old person and impulsive child.

After my predicted five minutes, an aide, a young woman in a blue medical smock, flounced into the room, a look of disgust on her tired face. “What is it now, Mary,” she muttered with a sigh. Then she noticed that Nic and I were there.

I raised my eyebrows. “Hello,” I said.

She looked at me, turned her mouth up in a slow, barely discernible smile, and muttered, “Hello.” Then, with strained civility, she addressed my mother. “What can I do for you, Mary?”

“I want to get in my wheelchair and go to the Malt Shop with my daughter and grandson before they get sick of me and go home. They don’t like to stay long, so we need to get a move on.”

Without a word, the aide wrapped a canvas gait belt around my mother’s back and under her arms. Then, holding the two ends in her hands, she braced one foot against my mother’s paralyzed left foot and swiveled my mother into her wheelchair. My mother landed on the leather seat with a plop.

“Ouch!” she said.

I caught these little glimpses now and then, of how it was between my mother and these overworked, underpaid women who didn’t like or understand her. The women who thought my mother was “difficult” and “demanding.” I understood why they might be slow—or even a little rough at times. And in a way their bad behavior was a help to me. A reminder to me to be kind even when it cost me. A reminder that if my life lacked just one of the crucial parts that kept me mostly steady, like my good husband, my fulfilling career or the safe neighborhood we lived in, I, too, might treat my mother with too much force.

“I can finish that,” I told the sullen aide. I caught a look at her nametag, “Erica.” Just Erica. Not even the honor of having a whole name on the tag. “Thank you, Erica,” I said, and she met my eyes for the first time.

“Okay, then,” she said and quickly left the room. I put the wheelchair’s foot- and armrests in their places and helped my mother lift her paralyzed left leg to set her limp foot onto the footrest. Nic offered to push.

“Don’t run me into a wall, Nicolas,” my mother said. Nic looked insulted but didn’t say anything.

The Malt Shop was a vending machine area in the lower level, with six tables and a bunch of chairs, where visitors and residents could sit and eat all kinds of things that were bad for them. Snickers bars and Doritos and Hostess Cupcakes. Lattes and cappuccinos thick with sugar and scalding hot. The fluorescent bulbs overhead made even the young people in the room look sickly. This was the only part of The Shores that Nic liked. He'd stuff himself here with whatever garbage I allowed him to buy. Because I felt sorry for putting him through this weekly ordeal, I always let him have more sugar here than I did at home.

The Malt Shop, like the inefficient call-light system at The Shores, wasn't easy on elderly or otherwise limited people. The machines were ordinary vending machines with dollar-bill slots that would reject anything less than a perfectly delivered, entirely whole dollar; the coin slots required fine motor coordination to slide coins into them; the numbers and letters that described the options were small and poorly illuminated. The soda machines were the easiest; you pressed the button that bore the picture of your choice, and the chosen can tumbled down into the chute below. The snack machines were harder; they displayed their offerings in separate, numbered cells. In order to get the machine to surrender your choice, you had to punch in the proper code on a keypad and then push hard on the hinged door below, hold the door open with one hand, and reach in to claim your purchase with the other. Some of the Malt Shop customers had difficulty reading the numbers on the keypad; most had trouble with the hinged door, especially the many stroke-impaired people, many of whom had the use of only one of their arms. The coffee machine was a nightmare. It gave too many choices: sugar or Equal, cream or black, latte or cappuccino or mocha, or hot cocoa. If you did hit the right combination of buttons, you still ran the risk of first-degree burns from the hot liquids that spewed out into the cup and splashed up and over the rim.

Nic liked helping the shakier, slower residents with the machines. Many of them knew his name and would call it out when he arrived in the Malt Shop area. "Hey, Nic man! Good to see you!" "Nic. Over here. Be a good boy and help me with the coffee again, would you, there's a pal." People liked to pat his

blond head, comment on his face full of freckles or his missing front teeth. Nic wasn't crazy about the head patting, but he tolerated it.

"Why didn't you call me back today?" my mother asked as I locked her wheelchair in place at a table.

"I had clients in my office all day today, Mom. Sorry."

Her phone calls were a pain in the ass, actually. She called and left mumbling message after mumbling message on my work voicemail and on my home answering machine. She forgot she'd called. Or her anxiety would rise so high she'd be unable to wait and she'd ring me again, hoping for a different outcome.

Sometimes her requests were simple. Would I bring a Big Mac and some fries? Could I stop and buy her some new socks? Would I bring my new dog, Olivia, for a visit?

But even if I was free to answer, I couldn't provide what she really needed. A way to buy back the condo she used to share with my father, the money for a live-in nurse. Because I knew I couldn't give her what she needed, her calls not only pissed me off, they caused me pain.

Before I could launch into more excuses about not having called her back that afternoon, Eugene came to our table. Eugene had scared me when I first met him. Now he provided a welcome distraction.

Eugene was a man of indeterminate age who always wore bib overalls and a red plaid flannel shirt. His hair was gray, his mannerisms childlike, his mental capacity severely limited. He had three or four stock phrases that he used for every conversation. Eugene walked over to our table and pointed to Nic's left arm. "Nice arm on you, you like dat arm on you?" he chirped.

"Yeah." Nic scowled. "I told you that last time." I gave Nic a warning look. We'd had lots of talks about kindness and patience in the car rides home after our Shores visits. Eugene proceeded with his routine.

"How old are you?"

"Seven, same as last week." Nic sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Who made you?"

Nic looked up at me in silent appeal. I took over.

"God made him, Eugene, God and his dad and I. We made

him. He's pretty cool, don't you think?"

Eugene beamed at me and pointed at my arm. "You like dat arm on you? Nice arm on you."

"Yup, I like this arm right where it is, thanks."

Smiling and humming to himself, Eugene moved off to cruise the room for new victims. In the beginning, before I'd gotten used to Eugene, his arm questions had seemed ominous to me, as if he were contemplating ripping our arms off. But now I knew he was just being friendly, saying the only words he had access to.

I brushed some pretzel crumbs off our table onto the floor. "This place is a pigsty," my mother mumbled. Nic brought us three Diet Cokes. Eugene circled the room, scooped up three straws, and deposited them on our table without a word.

He wandered off, and we proceeded, the three of us, to engage in disjointed nursing home conversation. Half an hour of this and my head was spinning.

"I'm going home now." This from my mother, of course.

"Good luck with that," I said.

At this point, my mother's bids for release had become routine. And like any routine, they were automatic, almost unconscious. My responses were also automatic. I knew she wasn't ever leaving The Shores. I was pretty sure she knew it too. I used to offer her long, careful, compassionate explanations about why she couldn't go home.

Then one day she told me to shut up. "Stop talking that way. It hurts me!" she said.

"But, Mom. You need to know the truth."

"I know the truth," she'd told me, "and I hate it."

So, I'd stopped explaining. Instead, I participated in this ritualized exchange of her raising the issue of going home and my saying "maybe" or "someday" or "good luck."

"That woman who bought my condo had better pack up her stuff," my mother said now. "I'm moving back in."

Several years before either of our parents were at the ends of their lives—at a time when our father had been diagnosed with emphysema and was unemployed and we all could see that they weren't prepared for any additional disasters—our father had

transferred ownership of their condo to my brother and me so that if he and my mother ever needed government funding, the state couldn't confiscate their home. Our parents had paid us a small rent while they lived there. After our father died we'd had to sell the condo. We couldn't afford the mortgage and other expenses, and it was pretty clear our mother wasn't ever going to be able to live there again. We'd thought about keeping this hard truth from her, but it seemed kinder to let her know. We did lie to her about her furniture though; we'd sold everything at auction. She didn't need to know that.

"That woman will be a little surprised to see you, don't you think, Mom?"

"Guess what, Mom," Nic interjected.

"What-Mom?" I said, in the way I always did when he opened a subject with "guess-what-Mom."

"I thought of a new part of the video game I'm working on making." Nic was always creating video games in his head and on paper, with complicated plots and elaborate diagrams.

"What kind of a dog should I get?" my mother said, overlapping Nic. "The condo association says you can't have a big dog, but they let us have our collie, Abby."

"Remember the third level? How Myrlo has to find the key to the starship so he can fly to Chronos but the key's locked in a trunk but you need that key to open the trunk?"

I didn't remember, of course. For many weeks, Nic had been talking about this game. Telling me every little detail. I couldn't keep it all straight. So I said, "Uh huh..." in that noncommittal tone that fools no one. It didn't fool Nic. And it didn't daunt him.

"I think a Great Dane and a collie, or maybe two Great Danes," said my mother.

"I think it would work," said Nic, "if just before Myrlo gets to the trunk, there's a portal and he shoots his fireballs at it and it opens and he goes to a room where there's a big dragon-wizard guy and he has to answer a riddle and then he finally gets the key to the trunk and..." They wove their sentences on and on, my mother and my son, both of them apparently at ease with the process, while my eyes burned and my head ached.

“Let’s repaint the living room of the condo,” my mother interjected, and for some reason Nic suddenly tuned to her frequency.

“Can’t do that,” he told her smugly. I shook my head and made a “shhh” gesture with my finger against my lips. He ignored me.

“Oh, yeah, why?” my mother said, sounding like just another kid on the playground.

“Your condo has been...” Nic lost his nerve.

“Uh...it’s...uh...the big ‘S’ word.”

“You mean, *sold*. I know what you mean. Don’t you tell me that. I don’t want to hear it.”

Nic looked embarrassed. I jumped in with my part of the ritual. “When you’re ready to leave here, Mom, we’ll find you a place to live that you’ll like as well as your old condo.”

“Don’t want another place! I want *my* condo back!” she shouted. Heads turned. I knew that one of my mother’s friends here had advised her not to trust her children, told her we were money-grubbers, turkey vultures who’d swooped in and picked her clean while she was stuck here, helpless to stop us. I wondered if the people staring at us now were seeing me as a loyal, patient daughter—or a thing with hooked beak and bloody feathers.

“Time to go,” I announced.

My mother mumbled something like “ack,” and “tsk.” Shaking her head with disapproval. Nic pushed her chair back to her room, and I helped her into her bed. Then I sat for a little while and made small talk while Nic rolled around on the other, empty, twin bed.

“When are we going home?” he whined.

“In five minutes,” I told him. That’s what I always said. And it was always more like fifteen. Although I hated coming to The Shores almost as much as Nic did, I also felt bad leaving. Because once again my visit, I was pretty sure, had done nothing to make my mother feel any better or be any closer to recovery.

Eventually I kissed my mother on the cheek and went home drained, with work phone calls and dinner still to be made, and homework to witness, and endless video game plots to listen to.

Around nine or so, with Nic in his pajamas, teeth brushed,

favorite stuffed dog Arfie in his arms, I read him a story. Then I turned out the lights and sat on the edge of his bed to talk awhile. What was good about his day? He'd gotten an A+ on his book report. He'd made progress with writing code for his video game, but now he needed another programming book. Could we buy it tomorrow?

"Yes. Good night, now."

"Wait. Mom. I have another question."

"Fast, make it fast. I'm tired."

"Why is Grandma like that?"

"You know about the brain bleed."

"I mean, she's..." He searched for the right words. "She's dumb...and I don't really think she likes me."

He was working his way around to being excused from visiting, I could tell.

"Nic, she needs company. We have to go."

"Could it happen to me, do you think?"

"A stroke, you mean?"

"I'd hate to get dumb like that."

"No chance, honey. Your brain is too big and too healthy for that to happen. Besides, kids never get strokes."

"Never?"

"Almost never."

"Thank you for your honesty," he said, imitating one of my parent phrases.

"Time for sleep, Nic."

"Mom?"

Sigh. "Yes, Nic."

"If I have a stroke, will you hate visiting me?"

"Of course not. I'd want to be with you all the time. But it isn't going to happen, honey." I choked up a little, tried to hide it. The thought of any of my children being felled by a catastrophic illness or accident was unbearable. I put it out of my mind as quickly as I could.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

The thought that went through my mind was *No, I'm not okay. I'm stretched so tight you could play me like a guitar.* The truth was I was sort of okay. I'd adapted to the new normal of

never having enough time for anyone I loved, including myself. I'd started eating well again though, and I did my best to sleep eight hours when I could and to de-stress with a three- or four-mile run whenever I could squeeze it in. I was coping. But just barely.

"Yes, hon," I told Nic. "I'm okay." I pulled the door almost shut.

"Mom?"

"Absolutely the last question. What?"

"I'm going to the planet Chronos tomorrow. Wanna come with me?"

Judith Ford's writing has been published in Clackamas Literary Review, Confluence, Connecticut Review, Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review, Jumbelbook, The Laurel Review, The Meadow, North Dakota Quarterly, The Penmen Review, Pennsylvania English, Quarter After Eight, Rubbertop Review, Southern Humanities Review, and Willow Review. She is the co-author (with Martin Jack Rosenblum) of the poetry collection Burning Oak, published by Lionhead Press (1986). She has received Pushcart Prize nominations for fiction and poetry, won first place in the Willow Review Prose Award (2005), and was awarded "most highly commended" in the Margaret Reid Poetry Contest (2008).

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