

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

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Inheritance

"I brought more pictures," Ellen said and held up the black and white photographs to show her mother.

Ellen's mother continued to watch the TV, which displayed a repeating loop of pictures: daisies, lilies, black-eyed Susans, marigolds, and geraniums, each racing from bud to bloom via time-lapse photography.

"Do you remember how we used to sled down the hill at Grandma's house?" Ellen asked and held up a photo of her grandmother.

Ellen's mother turned toward her and smiled. Recognition? Remembrance? A moment of happiness? Or only a vacuous smile? It varied depending on how tired Ellen felt.

A nursing assistant came into the room to bathe and change her mother.

"Excuse me," the woman said. "I'll come back later."

"It's alright, leave everything. I'll take care of it," Ellen said.

Early on, the staff had taught her how to wash her mother. They thought she was helping; she was checking up on them. It gave her a chance to see her mother's entire body and look for bedsores or any other signs of abuse or neglect.

Ellen went into the bathroom, filled the small, plastic basin with warm, soapy water then carried it to her mother's bedside. She pulled back the blanket and took off her mother's shirt to reveal a body so like her own—a bit small, but stronger and more athletic than anyone expected from women of their generations. Really, the only differences between them were age and Ellen's hands with their long fingers that swayed inward toward the thumbs like trees bending in the wind, gifts from her father.

Ellen ran the warm cloth over her mother's face, arms, hands, and torso. She washed her mother's legs and feet and took off her diaper. Returning to the bathroom, she poured out the dirty water and filled the basin with clean, warm water to rinse her mother's body. She thought of what it would be like to never shower again and had the urge to wash her mother a second time, but clean had a different meaning now. She dressed her mother in a bright green shirt with sunflowers stitched on the front and a clean diaper then settled her in a new position—tilted slightly to the right with pillows behind her head, back, and knees. After pulling the blanket up to cover her mother's bare legs, Ellen sat down to wait until it was time to leave.

On the weekends, she came at lunchtime to feed her mother. Ellen's daughter said she would visit every Sunday.

"You have enough to do with the girls and your job," Ellen always answered.

"You need a break," her daughter said.

"My kids are grown."

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"The girls are teenagers; they can cook dinner one night a week."

"I'm fine," Ellen would say to end the conversation, which they would have again in a week or two.

Ellen's mother began to snore, and still, she sat beside her just as her mother had sat beside her mother, who had sat beside her mother, who had sat beside her mother. Five generations. That's how far back Ellen was sure of. All had lived well into their nineties. Frail and broken, except for their hearts, which refused to stop beating.

Those women had kept their mothers at home. Ellen made no excuses. Years ago, she knew, even as she watched her grandmother linger and admired her mother's devotion, she'd never do the same.

Ellen checked her watch and got up.

"I'll be a little late tomorrow," she said and kissed her mother's cheek. Her mother continued to sleep.

On her way out, Ellen didn't stop at the nurses' station. She used to bother them every day. The reports had all been the same.

"She'll never speak again, and we don't know how much she understands," they said. Then, as if to give Ellen good news, they'd add, "Your mother's heart is strong. Her blood pressure is normal."



The next afternoon Ellen sat in the doctor's office.

"How long have you been feeling tired?" the doctor asked.

"A while, but that's to be expected. I've been taking care of my parents."

"They're both still alive?"

"My mother is. She's ninety-four. My father died nearly a year ago. He fell and never recovered."

"It happens all the time," the doctor said.

"He refused to use a walker," Ellen said and looked down at her hands.

"No... well, I'm sorry about your father. What I mean is, caregivers, especially women, get too focused on someone else, they lose track of how they're feeling."

"I know how I'm feeling."

"How long have you been having the palpitations?"

"About a month," Ellen lied. It had been several months. Maybe they had started right after her father died.

She remembered the thrill of the first time her heart danced in her chest, then just a possibility that something was wrong.

She'd come to expect them every day and was disappointed when they didn't show.

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"The arrhythmia that you have..." the doctor said, "...no damage to your heart yet ... come back in..."

Ellen hardly listened, she was too busy enjoying the word, arrhythmia.

The doctor wrote out a prescription.



A few hours later, Ellen sat beside her mother. The dinner tray was mostly empty. Her mother smiled and watched the irises, dahlias, and tulips blooming on TV.

Ellen took the bag from the pharmacy into the bathroom where she opened the bottle of pills and spilled one into the palm of her hand. As she filled a paper cup with water, her heart jumped and twirled. She looked up at her mother's face in the mirror. Then she looked down at her father's hand and dropped the pill into the toilet.