

When a mother becomes a child

BY JOSEPHINE BROUARD

What do you do when the mother you love intensely is no longer of sound mind? And you know that the last thing she'd want is to be put into frail care? I was about to find out...

WHEN I RECEIVED yet another e-mail, followed by yet another phone call, I knew I had to drop everything and fly home. Mum's condition was deteriorating daily and Dad was exhausted from taking care of her. The pair of them have three kids, but the South African diaspora had resulted in all of us living worlds apart.

As the oldest and the one with the most flexible life, it seemed natural that I should respond to their call for help. Having spent little time with my parents in the 20 years since I had migrated to Australia, I wanted to see for myself what needed to be done. My mother has Alzheimer's disease, you see, and



Parenting an aged parent: writer Josephine Brouard

Dad has been looking after her on his own since her diagnosis four-and-a-half years ago.

It's no easy task, caring for anyone who is chronically ill, but it was obvious to friends and family that taking care of Mum was taking its toll on Dad. With no children close by, my 78-year-old father had no relief from the strain of bathing, dressing, feeding and exercising Mum, not to mention making daily decisions on her behalf.

When I arrived back in South Africa for a ten-week stay, my sense of coming home was palpable. I felt instantly

simple as brushing teeth was a hurdle. My mother had forgotten what a toothbrush was, and she needed coaxing. "Front first, now the back – good girl – now round the back, to the left, now to the right – hard – good girl... Now let's gargle together... three times..."

It's amazing what love will do. If someone had told me I would become softly spoken and sense intuitively what my mother needed, I would have shaken my head in disbelief. But it's true – I became a modern-day Florence Nightingale, and while caring for Mum wasn't exactly fun, it was what had to

be done. Dad was whistling again like he used to, relieved to be able to rest. We took it in turns to follow Mum as she paced up and down in the wee hours of the morning, watchful to see

what she would do next.

One night on my father's watch, he dozed off while my mother went walking. When Dad awoke, he found Mum, dazed and confused, defecating on the lounge-room floor. We had left the bathroom lights on, but Mum had forgotten how to use a toilet. The following day, while my father and I were in the garden, Mum blocked a bathroom drain with a wad of tissues so that when we returned inside, half the house was underwater. In a panic we called the neighbours, and the four of us spent the next three hours mopping up the mess.

Vigilance became the order of the day and Dad and I took the step of bringing nappies into my mother's routine. Thankfully, she took to these with alacrity, and she seemed to enjoy the protection from embarrassment they gave her in public. But there were still incidents and accidents and I became increasingly aware that Dad simply couldn't care for Mum at home any longer. Like all the concerned aunts, uncles and cousins around us, I began to echo their sentiment about my father – "He's a saint!" – and wondered how on earth Dad had managed so well with Mum for so long.

SO I BEGAN researching frail-care residences. Within days, thanks to a good contact, I visited a rambling residence called Abbey Lodge, set in an idyllic rural area only five minutes' drive from my father's home. I sensed we had found the right place for Mum. The frail-care lodge's owner had a father with Alzheimer's – and her father stayed there, too. The price, to my amazement, was reasonable and with the exchange rate in Australia's favour, I knew I could afford it. There were a zillion things to begin arranging, but before Abbey Lodge gave my mother's room to someone else, I paid a deposit. We had six weeks to complete all the arrangements.

It was hard for my father to accept that this was an inevitable step. "I love your mother. We've been together 50 years. I won't abandon her," Dad kept saying, uncharacteristically grim.

Occasionally Mum was especially sweet and pliant and would even joke with us, and this made Dad and me stare at one another. I'd feel my heart tug, my breath catch, my eyes begin to well... and I'd wait for the moment to pass.

The day after I paid the deposit, my mother was almost her old self and, by nightfall, my father was voicing a desire to turn back on the decision. "I'm not ready," he said. "She's not ready. She still recognises me."

I said nothing, recalling my sister-in-law's warning before I left Australia. "Don't tell your father what to do, Josephine. Let him make his choices."

I was worried nevertheless, and discussed the problem with family members – most thought that my father was deluding himself. My mother recognised him, sure, but that was all. Like a two-year-old, she relied on him for survival, but the intimacy, camaraderie and intellectual banter they once had was now gone. Alzheimer's is a cruel disease – I tried not to remember the amazing woman my mother had once been. I just loved the little, helpless person she had become.

Then I received an e-mail from my sister in Baltimore that incensed me. "Maybe Dad's right – perhaps it's too soon?"

"Really?" I typed. "And who is going to pick Dad up off the floor when he's collapsed with exhaustion in six months? Who is going to find affordable frail care close to Dad then? Who is going to pay for it? Who is going to take time off out of their life to help our parents through the crisis?"

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happy as I unpacked in the guestroom of my parents' modest two-bedroom retirement-village bungalow. My parents have always been kind and loving, and the home they created for their family always felt safe, comfortable and peaceful. Gazing now upon my father's stress-bloated face and my mother's sweet but vacant features, I felt an enormous surge of love.

I soon saw for myself the seriousness of Mum's condition. She could do nothing for herself except get in and out of chairs, beds and baths, and occasionally follow requests to open her mouth to eat. Even something as

A lifetime of happy memories: Josephine's father Yves and mother Claude were kind, loving parents



Fortunately I had the wisdom to show my father the missive before sending it. “Dad,” I said as I looked him in the eyes. “You’re right – you’re not ready. Mum’s not ready. No-one’s ready. It’s awful. But you know what? We have to do this. Because no time is ever the right time!”

MY FATHER went quiet and I sent my sister an edited version of my e-mail. The next day a miracle happened. My father admitted he had been thinking all night. He didn’t want to do it, but he knew that he couldn’t go on like he had. It was time to put Mum in frail

care, even though it troubled all of us.

My father wrote a long e-mail to my siblings outlining his views, and both my brother and sister rallied with encouragement and support.

Now I had a long “to do” list to attend to. I had to sort out the bridging finance, transform my mother’s new room from drab to delightful, decide what to pack and what to leave behind, carefully label and list all her belongings, ask her doctors to write a report on her condition, copy all her medical prescriptions – the list seemed endless.

I sensed that my father didn’t want to know about any of it. So I dropped him off at the airport to take his first holiday in years without my mother,

then returned to the retirement village to take care of her.

I’ll be honest – it was a scary week. Not ever having had children myself, I don’t know what it’s like to take care of a person around the clock. There were times when I just wanted to shake her. She was frustratingly slow, so confused and so contrary. But I knew that if I became impatient, raised my voice or tried to rush her, it would only make my sick mother worse.

At a Christmas barbecue in the village clubhouse, I felt at the end of my tether. Village residents, wanting to be helpful, kept pointing out that my mother was wandering off aimlessly. I’d nod, put down another unfinished

cup of tea and scurry off after her.

How does Dad do it? I’d wonder over and over as I sank into bed at night with Mum snuffling gently by my side.

When Dad returned refreshed from his sojourn, it was time for us to move Mum. I had arranged for her room to be painted and new furniture to be installed and we’d visited the residence every day before moving her in permanently. On one of our visits, Mum had a rare lucid moment and shared with me her horror at all the ailing people she saw around her. “Horrible,” she shuddered, rolling her eyes at me as I strapped her into her car seat.

I was stunned, not having noticed my mother’s discomfiture around her

I acknowledge that the move to frail care may take Mum away from us sooner rather than later



future fellow residents. Some were in wheelchairs, others slouched in sofas, a couple dribbled, but a few were friendly and curious. But then I understood. My mother's behaviour was very much in character. All her life, she'd concerned herself with the sick, frail and those generally less fortunate than her. It was no wonder she had hidden her dismay during our visits.

So what did we tell Mum about the move? We fabricated a story that we hoped would minimise her misgivings. "Mum, the doctor wants you to go to this nice clinic for a check-up. He's worried about your blood pressure," I'd said, with Dad silent in the background. We waited for a reaction from her, but there wasn't one.

On the day of the move, the three of us sat in her new light-filled bedroom

and looked at each other, unsure what to do next. I suggested a walk in the garden and Dad agreed so – hand in hand – the three of us ambled around the shady garden and chatted inanely. My mother said very little and walked with her head down, barely noticing the vegetable patch or the sunflowers in the large, rambling garden. Eventually, we sat Mum in the sitting room and, ever polite, my mother showed interest in the elderly folk around her, stroking one woman's arm as if to soothe her.

When one of the nurses brought in tea and scones and my mother showed her appreciation, Dad and I tiptoed out and drove away. Ten minutes later, we were sipping milkshakes in a shopping mall, staring at each other, stunned.

IN THE ENSUING first weeks, Mum seemed to adjust to her new home. She was happy to see us, but within minutes she'd walk off in a daze again, or fall asleep on a sofa in front of the TV. Each day, Dad and I would visit, hearts in our mouths, waiting for bad news – but all seemed well. The nurses appeared to like her. She was pampered – a hairdresser she knew cut her hair. Musicians came often to play for the residents. Her room was bright and welcoming.

As for Dad, he began to have a life. He began reading again, playing bridge, visiting the gym and even going to dinner parties. For the first time in a long time, he also focused on his own health and visited medical specialists to get to the bottom of various aches and ailments. I breathed more easily.

So it was that Dad and I celebrated our first Christmas together in a very long time and were able to include Mum in some of the fun. But eventually I had to return to my husband, my home and my life.

Since then, Dad has been relentlessly positive about picking up the threads of his life, but Mum seems to be going downhill. Hardly a week goes by when my own words don't haunt me. "People who are put into frail care tend to go one of two ways," I wrote to my siblings when I was in South Africa. "Some live for years while others, once separated from their loved ones, appear almost to choose to die."

Dad visits Mum and daily reminds her, with words and caresses, that he

loves her. But still, just two months since we took this drastic step, she is noticeably worse.

This week I had an e-mail from Samantha, Abbey Lodge's general manager. "I wish I could report only happy things about your mother, Josephine, but sadly, I cannot. Your mum has aged a great deal since coming here. She has lost weight and it's taken us a while to establish why. We now know that one of the reasons she didn't eat is because of pain caused by a long-time gum infection. She is on antibiotics now and eating a little better.

"The girls and I have grown to love your Mum," Samantha continued. "She is such a gentle and sweet woman. I have been so sad to see your dad come in – he looks heartbroken when he sees your mother's deterioration."

And there's the rub. After ten weeks with my parents that I will treasure forever, I acknowledge that the move to frail care may take Mum from us sooner rather than later. Do I have any regrets? No, because Dad and I did the best, the very best that we could.

And would we do the same again? Neither of us can answer that. But if I had any real choice in the matter, Mum and Dad would still be together at home, poring over a crossword or on the sofa, Mum's head in Dad's lap, listening to their favourite French love songs.

Have you needed to care for frail relatives? Tell us how it affected you. Write to the address on page 12 or see www.readersdigest.com.au/you saidit.