

1st place Gillian Charlton (NSW)

“You’ll love it once you’re in!”

This was my mother’s method of enticing us as young children to leap into the North Sea in the bitterly cold English mid-winter. It became a *family* catchphrase, synonymous with the way my mother would take life in both hands and wring the maximum from it. A strong woman both physically and emotionally, she would bounce back from life’s adversities in a way that has left my sister and me, even to this day, embarrassed by our tears. Unhappiness and illness were self-indulgence not to be tolerated.

My father’s phone call surprised me. It was unusual for him to initiate contact and when he spoke it took me some time to comprehend. Apparently my mother was sick but the information was vague. She hadn’t hurt herself and as far as I could gather had no infection. Prompted by my husband, I offered to return to England. We had spent Christmas there six weeks earlier and selfishly I hoped my father might say it wasn’t necessary, but the immediate relief was evident in his voice and I knew I would have to go.

I was totally unprepared for what I found when I arrived. The usual effusive greetings were replaced by a quiet stillness. In fact it was several moments before I registered my mother sitting motionless on the sofa. She looked shrunken, older, greyer and yet only six weeks had passed since I had last seen her. Maybe I had been too caught up in the festivities to notice her decline then but there was no denying it now. My father was obviously looking to me for solutions, and his helplessness made me conscious of the fact that to even begin to deal with this there was going to have to be a role reversal. I was no longer the child; I would have to take charge.

“Has she seen her doctor?”

No, there is no doctor. This is no surprise. My mother has little faith in doctors. I ring the local practice. There are no appointments unless it is an emergency. Is this an emergency? I doubt she is in danger, so I take an appointment for the following week, and then search the cupboards for food. It’s eight hours since my last meal. The cupboards are empty and it appears it may have been even longer since my parents have eaten.

Over the next week I realise the problems my father has had. For him too there has been a role reversal. He is older than my mother and has become frail and demanding as he aged. My mother has been his carer, driver, cook, and motivator over the past few years; now he must regain those skills. We drive to the supermarket. My mother trembles on the verge of weeping, she doesn’t want to get out of the car. My father stays with her while I quickly gather the provisions for a meal that both of them barely touch.

I wash, I clean, I cook; and in all this I try to kid myself that I am being useful but when I walk into the lounge my father has his arms around my mother as tears fall down her face. They both look so lost my heart aches. The house is sombre. We speak in matter-of-fact terms, unsure how to make or continue conversation. To break monotony I suggest a drive to the beach. This will give Dad a chance to practise his driving and Mum a change of scenery. It takes forever to prepare. My mother is cold; the coat, the hat, the gloves, the blanket are not enough. We add a hot water bottle and finally set off. The trip is dismal and I wonder if it was worth the effort. I am angry with my mother, I am angry with myself. I feel guilty that I cannot do more to fix the problem.

At night I retreat to my bedroom, thankful for the space. It occurs on me that my father does not have this respite and I think that I might need to facilitate this. I feel the effects of the pervasive mood of the house and yet it seems impossible to break through the barrier of unresponsiveness in order to lighten it. I also feel a

desperate need to know if this is what is to be from now on. I miss my husband and children, and I hold doubts that I have the strength to change things.

Waiting to see the doctor has been interminable and when the day arrives I realise I have high expectations. My mother shuffles into the surgery, swamped by her heavy overcoat that hides the dowdy tracksuit she prefers to wear these days. I can see my mother is intimidated. I am unsure whether to go in with her but she seems to want me to. I am surprised to hear my mother answer the doctor's questions, but her replies are simple and I feel they hardly paint the picture of what is happening. I wonder if this doctor can have any clue of how far from normal this is when she has never met my mother before. I want to tell her more but feel it is improper in front of Mum. Later, I suggest Dad book himself an appointment to talk about the problem but he too feels that would breach my mother's confidentiality. We return home, deflated. I think I wanted to know a diagnosis, a prognosis, a magic cure, but it has all been a bit vague. We've been given some tablets that might work and an appointment in a week. A week might as well be an eternity!

Each day we look for improvements. I start a journal to try and document them but it soon becomes clear there is nothing to report. In fact my mother is now becoming distressed by her inability to sleep. I try to get an earlier appointment but the doctor is off for two days.

I am searching for a way of connecting with mum. She seems so alone in her sadness, so when she complains of cold feet I massage them. This seems to relax her so I begin to give her back massages. This is way beyond the intimacy we had when she was well but I am feeling useful at last. We move a day bed into the lounge so that she can feel our presence as she rests. Over the following weeks her medication is changed and various strengths are tried. The progress is slow. There are bad days and better days. Gradually the better days outnumber the bad. Mum will *ask* for massages now – up to four a day! She doesn't talk to us about how she feels. That would be out of character anyway, but she does see a behavioural modification therapist and it seems to boost her.

I know I can't stay forever and at some point we will have to decide whether Dad can cope if the improvements cease. My mother still does not like to be left alone so I have persuaded Dad to talk to some of the people in their street. They know Mum has been ill and have brought flowers to the door but Dad has been reticent to tell them that Mum is depressed. He holds this tight to his chest as if ashamed that he has somehow failed. The curious thing is that he was once a general practitioner himself and yet though this whole episode he has been embarrassed and uncertain. After several months I leave. At the time I felt I was running out on Dad because, although better, Mum was hardly her old self. I feel guilty for leaving them to cope and for my joy to be returning to my own family, but the neighbours have been terrific. They drop by frequently and give Dad the freedom to go out.

Two years on, and my father has died. Attending his funeral, I am thrilled to find Mum strong, philosophical about her loss and keen to celebrate my father's life rather than his death. It would seem that the old Mum has finally returned. Interestingly, we don't ask her directly about her illness. It seems that that taboo still exists but we watch her carefully and are glad to see that she is eating and sleeping well and has become active in a number of social groups. I think she still takes her tablets and sees her GP but, again, I don't ask.

Lifelong behavioural patterns are hard to break and now as I write this I realise it would be good to be more open. I make another mental note to do better.