

I remember the first time I laughed at dementia. I laughed so hard my side hurt.

news.memorywell.com/2019/06/04/i-remember-the-first-time-i-laughed-at-dementia-i-laughed-so-hard-my-side-hurt

We're in the main dining room at the nursing home, my mother and I, listening to the bald, stocky karaoke guy along with dozens of other residents. Some, like Mom, have dementia. Some are in wheelchairs; some are asleep. One spirited lady is singing along, pointing at some indiscernible person during "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree."

But the real magic happens when the karaoke guy starts singing "Hello, Dolly." Instead of Dolly, he starts singing to my mother: "Hello, Barbara!" He kneels beside her and takes her hand. She smiles and gazes at him like he's Frank Sinatra. I don't recall her ever making goo goo eyes like this. I giggle. I can't help it. In spite of everything, I have to admit I'm having a good time.

It happens like that sometimes.

My mother's decline had been swift. Shortly after her pacemaker surgery in 2004, my brother and I noticed symptoms, which we initially thought were a reaction to medication. They persisted, though. She called to ask whether I'd received a package addressed to a town I didn't live in. She wondered why a deceased family member didn't call more often. Then, my sister-in-law discovered a prescription for Aricept, the anti-dementia medication, which my mother had inadvertently left on the kitchen table.

The monster knocking at our mother's door became relentless. We repeatedly landed in the emergency room

when she had stomach issues; each time, she would argue with me and the staff about never having been seen there before. After a nurse brought her contrast for her CT scan, she'd insist that nobody had even come to say hello. Not long after, she was admitted to the hospital, a rehab facility, another hospital, then a nursing home. She never came home after that.

At the rehab, we tried our best to keep her content and calm, as we tried to understand the storm inside her. I brought back issues of *Reader's Digest* and did dramatic readings of funny, lighthearted columns. I think she appreciated my efforts, but she remained in that understandable rage. And sad confusion. "When are all the people coming?" she asked. "I know it must be soon. I have to get the house cleaned."



Barbara and Joanne Mason at a family wedding in 1995

I remember the first time I laughed at dementia. I laughed so hard my side hurt. It sounds cold, and I know it was inappropriate. But I just couldn't help it.

Mom walked up to the nurses' station, very matter-of-factly, and spoke to the physician on duty that early May night.

"I'd like to withdraw \$200." She pushed a slip of paper toward him. "I need it to buy a Thanksgiving turkey."

"Mrs. Mason," he smiled. "I'm afraid it's too early to buy turkey."

"But Thanksgiving is next week! All the people are coming!"

The doctor rose and started walking with her, arm-in-arm, explaining how a turkey could spoil if you bought it too early. "But I know yours will be the best-tasting turkey around. What else will you serve?"

"Oh, mashed potatoes, of course."

"That sounds delicious!"

I turned and pretended to study a bulletin board announcing the Mother's Day brunch in Dining Room C. But really, I was trying to stifle this laugh. Of course, trying to stifle it makes it more urgent. Kind of like when you have to...well, throw up. You try to suppress it, but it's too strong and gets the better of you. And to be honest, I'm not sure why I thought Mom's attempted bank withdrawal was so funny, when I knew it was so sad. But that laughter somehow got me through.

The Alzheimer's unit that became her eventual home tried to be a happy place. That summer Mom and I attended the Fourth of July picnic where we wore star-shaped plastic necklaces and joked about lima bean-flavored ice cream. We strolled through the locked courtyard to admire the flowers and watch birds at the feeders. Over and over, she asked me when she would go home. "Soon," I lied.

As summer turned into fall, she became more aggressive. She began snatching ice cream cups off other residents' trays, and I tried not to stare at the bandages on her hand after one resident scratched her in response. She started swatting at the aides when they bathed her. Eventually, she was so combative it took two aides to help her dress and use the toilet. I wanted to tell everyone that this wasn't her! "My Mom's not really like this! She wouldn't hurt anyone!"

She was in Stage 6 by then. The nurses told me there were only 7 stages. Her gait became shuffled and soon she couldn't walk without assistance. She started falling a lot. Her sentences became muddled. And finally, that milestone occurred. I knew it was coming.

"Come on, Mom!" I said brightly, offering my arm. "Let's go get ready for lunch."

She looked at me suspiciously. “And you are?”

“I’m Joanne.” For some reason I didn’t add, “I’m your daughter.”

“You gotta laugh,” a friend once told me. “At least *I* gotta laugh. It’s the only way. If I don’t laugh, I will go nuts.” The conversation occurred long before my mother was diagnosed with dementia, but his words stayed with me all that time.

So even in Stages 6 and 7, we were still looking for reasons to laugh. One came when an activities aide was calling out trivia questions. Mom had been sleeping through most of the game, but a question about the Grand Canyon clicked with her somehow. “Arizona!” she roared. I leapt up and hugged her, giving her a “Go, Mom, go!” cheer. She looked proud of herself and then fell back to sleep.

Another came when she mentioned that her long-deceased parents never came to visit. “Are they still living in the same place?” she asked. My sad laugh started brewing, and I bit my lip. “Yes, they are.” I answered. “At least, as far as I know.”

And the best one came on her 75th birthday when she opened a card from my cousin. There was a photo of two cats, one with a supportive paw around the other. It looked like the cat our family had years ago, and she smiled the biggest smile we’d seen all year. She dozed off shortly after, but the smile stayed. The laugh that burst out of me then was like a smile that couldn’t stay still.

Those smiles were worth a million dollars. More than that, actually.

Joanne Mason

Joanne Mason is a freelance health writer from Western Massachusetts.