

## “ONLY JEWELRY”

Linda Reid

“The Jewelry is missing!” I’m calling my sister Coleen from the car. Everything, including the phone, is disconnected at Mom and Dad’s house. “It’s Mom’s favorite stuff.”

I can hear Coleen sigh. We’re all tired. We’ve been moving Mom and Dad from their Oregon home of thirty-seven years for three days. “Did you check your van?”

“I checked, and, no, it’s not there,” Coleen says, “Don’t worry, Lin, it’s somewhere.”

“A large blue shoebox,” I explain, as if describing it will make it appear. “Necklaces, bracelets, all of it... Mom’s lifetime collection.”

Mom has been a trooper. She’d asked to put on her Indian piece with the large turquoise pendant. “Well, Mom,” I stammered, “we just haven’t quite found those items yet.” She’d paused for a second, then, “Well, I’ll just have to go naked to lunch.” We laughed.

That’s my mom. She’s a “dresser.” All my life she’s tried in vain to instruct me in good quality clothing, expensive shoes, purses to match, and, of course, accessories.

We are moving them to Flowering Desert Assisted Living. Mom got sick to her stomach the first night here. I half-carried her frail, trembling body from the bathroom to sit on the edge of the bed while I quickly rustled through the dresser for pajamas. She brought them close up to her eyes and ran her shaky hands over both the top and bottoms, defining the style and color. Mom is blind, macular degeneration. She handed the pajamas back to me, saying in a frail voice, “Oh, I can’t wear these, honey. They don’t match.” That’s my mom.

Mom broke her back last year in a fall that doesn’t seem to be healing. Dad is trying to be the caregiver. At the *resort*, that’s the name we’ve given their new digs, there are attendants to look in on them in the morning, clean their apartment, do the laundry, stop by to take their dinner reservations. In other words, there is someone in and out of their apartment all day. This is good. This is why they are here. Dad can’t do it anymore. He wants to, but in our discussions he actually told me he has felt scared.

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Their home is now empty of furniture that has been moved to the new small apartment, stored, or sold at a garage sale—yesterday’s treasured lamp, today’s bargain. The old knotty-pine living room still reverberates as the heart of our family. I can hear laughter, smell Mom’s three-berry pie and taste Dad’s peach ice cream—a scoop fresh off the ice cream maker paddles. It was here we welcomed new babies, decorated Christmas trees, even had sudden wedding. Their fireplace had a glow that radiated security, on the happiest and darkest of days. Today, it stands cold, unused most of last winter.

What to do with the house? We four sibs have confabbed, deciding that brother Kelly should move in. Kelly’s the baby of the family and with three sisters to manage, he’s grown to be a sensitive and wise man. He moved back to town a year ago, just in time to be on the front line. We are grateful. It’s important to know that Coleen, who lives three hours away, Connie in Hawaii, and my husband Harry and I, who live in California, can stay at the family “hotel” on our visits, which are getting more frequent as the months roll on.

Yesterday I packed a small box with a jar of Dad’s favorite strawberry jam, the waffle maker and a bottle of syrup. It will be therapeutic for them to make some of their own meals. Mostly they’ll eat in dining area with other residents, but cooking something in your own space makes you feel, well, normal. Their apartment has a microwave and fridge. No stove. No hot burners to leave on, to forget.

I call my brother. “Kel, have you checked your truck for Mom’s jewelry?”

“It’s not there. It has to be in one of our cars or the truck, or...”

“...at Goodwill! Someone thought it was junk, maybe.”

“Nobody would toss out a five-hundred pound box of jewelry!” Kelly gives out his big laugh.

I love that laugh, especially right now.

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“It’ll show up. It’s got to.” Silence for a moment. “Look, I’m on my way to pick up Mom’s new walker. See you over at the resort.”

The resort staff brings Mom her drugs three times a day. We are especially pleased with this system because Mom’s taken to helping herself to pain medicine. Dad was never good at saying ‘no’ to Mom. Mom, even when younger, seemed to escape into illness and pills. Children aren’t privy to their parent’s inner lives so we only speculate what it was Mom might be hiding from: shyness, insecurity?

For the last years, Dad’s been Mom’s eyes, the cook, her dresser, the laundry man and secretary. We’ve all pitched in, paid for a gardener and housekeeper, signed on for Meals on Wheels, and purchased Medic Alert. Mom doesn’t like to wear the bracelet they gave her. “It’s not at all attractive, you know,” she said to me, a bit of a twinkle in her eye.

My last three week visit was a constant stream of need. I made a large calendar and installed it on the dining table, christening it the “Command Center.” All doctors appointments, various visits by physical therapists and med-minder nurses, phone numbers for the hospital and a dozen doctor offices, were written in large black letters so Dad could keep track of the circus that has become their lives. When not fixing meals, preparing medicine, driving to a myriad of medical appointments, and cleaning, I rubbed Mom’s back or helped her to the bathroom, changed sheets. At night, I’d lay wide-eyed. Did she need to get up? Would she try to do it without me and fall, again? I couldn’t imagine how the two of them got along by themselves. “You’d be surprised,” Mom smiled, her head nodding in Dad’s direction, as they shared a private look. They’ve taken pride in making it on their own, of providing a good life for their children. Now we are descending on them, taking care of them. Their lives are changing.

In the last year, Kelly’s practically lived with them, dashing over from work when summoned by one of their stress calls...to find the plunger, to get the blanket Mom knew was in

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the chest, to round up their cherished cat from outside. This and countless other *real* emergencies had become Kelly’s life. Even so, Mom kept falling, each time followed by two-weeks in the nursing home. The doctor put it plain, “If your Mom and Dad want to live together, it will have to be in a safer environment.” A week after this dire conversation, Dad was trying to help Mom into her robe when she got her feet tangled. They both went down. Another call to 911.

Both in their 80s, this move has been hardest on Dad since he’s still able to live without assistance and is more aware of what is taking place. Mom is just exhausted and confused. They’ve tried to be patient but Mom’s reaction has gone from “What a cute place and how nice you’ve fixed it up,” to, “I want to go home.”

I reach over and hit #4 on my cell phone. What time is it in Hawaii? “Hi, Connie?”

As soon as she hears my voice, she’s alert. “What’s wrong?” she snaps, worried. “It’s five in the morning.”

“Oops,” I laugh. “Everything’s fine. They’re moved. It’s small but adequate and the facility is nice, sort of homey. And clean...no funny smells.”

“Mom told me the food is horrible and Daddy is missing his yard. Do you think we jumped the gun?” I can see Connie biting her short stubby nails, a panic attack lurking.

“That’s my favorite middle-of-night question,” I say. “What this move is really about—the big one—is their safety.”

No response.

“When you come, you’ll see, Con,” I continue. “Things have changed since you were here last June.”

“I love you,” she says, a tremor breaking through. “We’re doing what needs to be done. I’m going back to sleep.”

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Mostly I'd called Connie because she isn't here...not able to be here. I could feel the ache in her last email: *I feel so far away. It's all happening so fast.*

Guilt. So much guilt. What should a good child do? Quit your job, leave your own family and move in with your parents to help them in their last years? Maybe. I had a friend who did just that.

I search my car for the umpteenth time for the missing jewelry. No luck. I lug bags and other stuff through the front door of Flowering Desert, my elbow pressing the large chrome button. The door opens automatically. Good feature.

The “greeters,” a row of resident ladies who always seem to be sitting on the bench just inside, chime out, “We're the welcoming party.” They have big smiles. I thank them.

“Well,” I say cheerfully to Mom and Dad as I enter their apartment, “I'm just in time for lunch. And, I've been officially invited by the greeters.”

Mom wrinkles her nose up and Dad immediately checks her out. If Mom doesn't go, Dad doesn't go. We've been instructed by the staff and all sibs have agreed, through tons of emails and phone calls, on a very important point. Our parents must be encouraged to get out of their apartment and join in with others.

“Oh, Mom, it will be fun,” I push, using my happy-voice while hoping she won't ask to wear one of her necklaces.

Dad and I help Mom into the wheelchair. “It's not comfortable,” she says. Her feet don't fit on the footrests. She can't operate the brake. She wants a different chair. This is huge. Getting Mom back and forth to the medical equipment shop, not counting her billion questions to the sales clerk and two hours of sitting in every possible chair—it's a full day.

Before we can set off for the dining hall, I must fetch Mom some socks. I take off her slippers and struggle to slip them onto her immensely swollen feet. Dad remembers he needs to

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shave. Thirty minutes later we're ready. I push Mom along the wide hall in her chair. Dad, whose big strides have recently turned into short shuffle-steps, hobbles beside.

Harry joins us for lunch. He's been down at the lamp store buying Mom and Dad a swagger-light for over their little dining area. Mom's a decorator, was even paid once for interior work at a lodge. They both care about their environment. Their living room end-tables were never a repository for medicine stuff. Christmas always looked like Santa's workshop, even towards the end when it was Kelly who dragged all the decorations down from the attic and did the set up, with Mom giving out instructions and Dad mixing eggnogs.

Harry tells us that the maintenance man will install the light. Mom and Dad are pleased. Of course, we suspect that when alone, they'll revert back to the awful overhead fluorescents, for the simple reason—they can see.

Lunch in the dining room is an over done hamburger patty, mashed potatoes, and carrots cooked too soft. Dad eats. Harry and I push our food around the plate and watch Mom chase what she can't see and then try to balance it on her fork. Her blouse becomes polka dotted with drippings. Dessert, on the other hand, is a yummy chocolate cake. My parents love sweets so we are a happy table. When Harry and I took them to Europe twenty-five years ago, they hung out in Italian sweet shops, then French, then Roman.

One of the lunch residents goes to the piano and after a few slow starts begins to pound out some old tunes. The room comes alive. The women outnumber the men thirty to four, and they begin to clap and sing. They lift their weak voices and some rock their wheelchairs back and forth. When the pianist hits on one of my favorites, I join in, my younger voice carrying the room. I walk through the tables singing and voices rise louder with my cheerleading efforts. Everyone is having a grand time. I end up at Mom and Dad's table and together we make a rousing end to a song they taught me years ago. Everyone gives us a big hand. The residents want me to stay and

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play with them but Mom wants to go back to the apartment and rest. With folks clapping, we leave the dining hall in a flourish. Mom and Dad are famous.

When we return to the apartment, Dad settles Mom in her armchair, two feet in front of the TV screen. Dad insists on taking the footrests off the wheelchair. “The chair fits better in the closet,” he says, as I tug them loose, knowing it will be an engineering fete to put them back on. I walk into the living room to join Mom and Dad. Sitting on the footstool, right beside Mom’s armchair, is the box of jewelry.

“Oh, gosh, look at this!” I exclaim, sitting on the footstool next to Mom. I open the box slowly. *Please let it all be here.*

“Look, Mom, all your jewelry!” I say. “Kelly must have found it and...” All of a sudden, I can’t finish. My throat has a ball in it the size of real sorrow. My parents have been displaced from their home, Mom’s not getting better, the food here is awful, and yet they are trying, even though confused, they’re trying so hard to make sense of what is now their lives, to support a decision we four have made for them. I try to swallow, to stop the ache from bursting out of me, but...a huge sob rocks my body, tears stream down my cheeks.

Mom reaches over to her side-table and feels for the Kleenex box. Daddy shuffles over and pulls a tissue out for her, hovering close by me. I want to stop crying...be strong for them, but it just keeps coming. Mom puts her hand on my head and runs it down my hair, handing me the tissue, stroking my hair, putting her arm around me and pulling me toward her so that my head is on her shoulder, saying softly, with the same consoling voice she’s used so many times in my life, when I was in trouble, when I was hurt, “It’s okay, baby. It’s okay. It’s only jewelry.”

I can only murmur, “Yes, Mama...it’s only jewelry.”