

A Haunting Disease

Category: Dementia

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | March 2, 2025

Dad and I visited Ma every day in the nursing home. Sometimes she greeted me with a smile and a welcoming, "Well, look who's here!" Other times she dismissed me with a menacing look and hurtful words: "You're a piece of shit." Dad would remind me that it was her dementia speaking, but that didn't erase my heartache or dry my tears.

Despite lacking higher education, due to her immigrant parents' belief that daughters did not deserve a college degree, Ma was a smart woman. She read constantly, both novels and newspapers, and she could mentally add up her grocery bill, always coming within a few pennies of the actual cost. Ma had a sharp mind, one that did not allow for false flattery or foolishness; instead, she would set a goal and achieve it, allowing nothing—and no one—to stand in her way.

Her dementia became evident when she could no longer work at the children's store where she had spent 41 years of her life. The more her back and legs—and mind—betrayed her, the more inward she became. Soon, she reduced her life to one chair, leaving it only to use the bathroom. She wore a white T-shirt, one of Dad's old ones, and white underwear whose rips and tears were sewn together with red thread, the only color her failing eyesight could clearly see. Watching her decline made Dad and me feel helpless. Finally, when she began wandering the halls at night—or even leaving the apartment building where she and Dad lived—we had no choice but to move her to a facility.

Dementia, I learned, is a thief. It robs the affected individual of mental acuity and their family of the loved one they once knew. It is a democratic disease, striking people of any age, background, and socioeconomic status. Dementia requires a great deal of patience from family members; it demands that an understanding attitude replace a judgmental one, that compassion override anger. I do not know how much awareness Ma had of her dementia, but I do know that it tested Dad and me all day, every day.

Ma died on March 21, 2007, but her dementia meant she'd left us several years earlier. Seeing what dementia did to her—and to her two sisters—makes me fear that I, too, will suffer from this debilitating condition. That thought haunts me.

Ronna L. Edelstein

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania