

# At the Flick of a Switch

Category: Letting Go

written by Martina Steiger | December 21, 2018

“I want to do something now. What can I do?”

My mother’s body and mind were restless, moving in their own patterns just like the gray, low-hanging clouds that morning in August. “Why don’t you tell me what you want me to do?”

She didn’t wait for my response but shouted, “Don’t you dare tell me what to do, I’m not a child!” while pounding her cane on the floor with such might that I could feel the vibrations in my stomach. Then she sank into her chair and fell silent, her eyes glazing over.

Soon it started all over again. “What should I do?”

I tried to stroke her arm and her face but she screamed, “Don’t treat me like a baby!” My stomach turned gnarly. I desperately wanted to bolt but didn’t dare leave her alone in the house.

So I simply sat down and looked at the woman across from me, at this eighty-six-year-old who—over the previous twelve years—had been performing ever-shifting iterations of her role as mother, aunt, wife, friend, and neighbour. She was becoming a stranger in this paradoxically all-too-familiar environment. After all, she had been born in this small town. But where was my mother rooted now?

When I suddenly heard my heartbeat echo in my ears, my mind stopped meandering. Utter silence filled the room. My mother had become completely motionless, staring with empty eyes into space as if her soul had wandered off and left her body behind. Shivers ran up and down my back and arms; every organ in my body felt tense; I could taste green bile on my lips. The minute hand of the satellite clock above my mother’s head kept moving—steadily, silently. As I watched it, I quieted down and came to a still point.

More than two hours passed. Then my mother’s eyes began to shift from a vacant stare to a gaze that met mine, and I could sense our breaths sinking into the same rhythm. Our eyes met for just a fraction of a second as she reached for her cane. Out of nowhere, I blurted out, “Mom, how about doing some ironing?”

“All right.” A muted grin crossed her face as she added, “I’m still better at it than you.”

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