

WHEN MY MOTHER STOPPED BREATHING

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Reader 1: When my mother stopped breathing, none of us noticed at first. We were so used to her fits and sulks; she had become extremely withdrawn lately, in any event. It was I, the baby of the family, who finally said something.

Narrator: Ma! What's the matter with you?

Reader 2: She just shook her head. Her color wasn't right, and she seemed more than usually immobile, even for such an old and frail woman. Now she looked like a statue of herself. That's when I noticed that her chest wasn't moving, her nostrils weren't fluttering. At first I thought maybe she was playing some game. She always had a strange sense of humor when we were growing up – hiding in crowded department stores, pretending to faint on the street. Maybe she was sneaking breaths when we weren't looking.

Narrator: Ma! Cut it out.

Reader 3: That grabbed my brother's attention.

Brother: Cut what out?

Narrator: Look at Ma. She's not breathing.

Reader 4: Always the baby, I was still proud of myself for pointing out the obvious.

Brother: Of course she's breathing. What are you, nuts?

Narrator: You wanna bet?

Brother: How much?

Reader 1: My mother sat quietly, her hands in her lap. Not moving, not breathing. Just watching us, back and forth, like a ping-pong game.

Narrator: Mom. You've got to breathe. Otherwise you'll die.

Reader 2: She shrugged. At least there was a little movement. She leaned forward and wrote on a pad of paper she always kept on the table.

Mom: What's the point of breathing?

Reader 3: It was hard to know how to answer her. We knew she hated her life. She told us so every day. Our parents had recently moved into one of those seniors-only semi-independent living places, with the last of the furniture and artifacts of their

lives. Now that my father had moved again, this time a solo journey, to the Masonic nursing home fifteen miles away, it was even worse.

Mom: Living alone is worse than death. I hope to God you never feel what I'm feeling now.

Reader 4: That always sounded as if she was putting a curse on us. Some people don't mind living alone. I'm not one of them.

Reader 1: We tried the usual distractions – card games, visits from the grandchildren, many doctor's visits, trips to restaurants or to local community theater.

Mom: What's the point? I just know I have to go back. To this place. The people here are so old. I don't belong here.

Reader 2: Looking back on it now, I can say I should have seen it coming. First she stopped wanting to go out. She'd find some excuse – she was too tired, the weather was bad, it would only be worse when she got back home.

Reader 3: Then she stopped getting out of bed. We heard about it. We got an earful from the administrators. Her aides would come in around nine a.m., raise the shade, try to coax her into getting dressed.

Aide: Edith, Edith, come on, get up.

Reader 3: They'd try to sweet-talk her into going down to the dining hall for breakfast, and she would give them hell. They ran for their lives. I was proud of her courage. It isn't easy for an old lady to lose her temper like that. Half the time younger people don't even pay attention. But these aides paid attention all right. They skedaddled.

Reader 4: I'd come by for a visit, her baby, with fat and wrinkles, and gray in my hair, and sure enough, she'd be lying curled on her side in bed. I could sometimes coax her as far as the sofa. For a few months she watched television. She ordered things from various home shopping networks. The boxes piled up, unopened. I'd open a box, shake out a green suede jacket.

Narrator: Look, Ma! It's so nice!

Mom: Send it back, send it all back. I don't know why I even ordered it.

Reader 4: Or she might say...

Mom: Keep it, maybe it'll fit if you lose a few pounds.

Reader 1: After that came the sitcoms. I'd call her and if Modern Family was on, she'd get off the phone.

Mom: Modern Family's on, call me later.

Reader 1: Bang, down would go the phone. He must have been on all night. I'd call her at all hours, always the same answer. Well, sometimes it was The Goldbergs or even Veep. Then she started complaining. Certain characters she didn't like on certain shows. As soon as they'd show their faces, she'd turn off the TV.

Reader 2: There was war coverage for a while. That seemed to perk her up a little. She watched the news avidly. I thought it was a sign that perhaps she was coming out of her life-long shell. She'd never been exactly consumed by current events.

Mom: After all, we're all going to die.

Reader 2: But actually, it was mostly the other side that was going to die, it turned out, and after she wept a little over the photos on TV, she stopped caring.

Reader 3: That was really the end. She turned her face to the wall and slept. She had them send up a tray with a sandwich, for dinner, just to give you a sense of her steady decline. Even when we kids came over, she wouldn't bother putting on make-up or even exchanging her slippers for socks.

Narrator: She's still not breathing! Maybe I should call a doctor.

Brother: You should call the Guinness World Book of Records if you think she's holding her breath all this time. Or call the nuthouse for yourself.

Reader 4: He laughed in a not-nice way. Nasty, always nasty. No wonder he went through three wives. He came to my mother's apartment, picked up every single item she owned, turned it around in his hands, and set it back down again. It didn't matter what – a bottle of pills, a half-empty glass, a knick-knack. Never once did he dust or clean.

Narrator: You should talk. Maybe *you* should try holding your breath.

Reader 1: My mother wrote...

Mom: Children, children. Stop fighting.

Reader 1: It was one thing she would never permit. Anyway, she did most of the fighting for us – she fought with salesgirls, our father, next door neighbors and their children and dogs, telephone operators, maitre d's – some of her greatest battles took place at restaurants and hotels. No one ever just assigned my mother a table in

a restaurant or a room in a hotel. You made her a first offer. We saw many victories over the years, a few stinging defeats.

Narrator: Oh, Mama, who will do your fighting now?

Reader 2: My brother rolled his eyes as if I was crazy. My mother wrote...

Mom: I'm done fighting.

Reader 2: Then she rose slowly and went back to bed, leaving me and my brother to look at each other, like dumb animals left standing in a field, and realize with dismay we didn't even like each other.

Reader 3: My mother went on this way, not talking, not breathing for a week or two longer, valiantly, holding on, holding back. Of course the place called in an ambulance and had her moved to a hospital – they didn't want the liability of a woman refusing to breathe on the premises. Not to mention, given the deficiencies of the place, the laxness of service and saltiness of the soup and so on, my mother could have started a trend, an epidemic. At the hospital, she pulled out the tubes, refused all treatments and tests. She wouldn't see the rabbi.

Mom: I never liked him...

Reader 3: she confided in a note she crumpled in her fist. She made a few of the nurses cry with her remarks, but she was getting tired.

Reader 4: Maybe she used her last breath on me.

Mom: Don't cry, little girl.

Reader 4: She said it tenderly. Her hands moved feebly, like a person using sign language. Maybe she was waving goodbye, maybe she was calling to someone out of our sight, behind our heads. The right hand with the broken wrist that had never mended, after the fall. The left hand with the inscribed wedding ring my father gave her: "I love you 14 karat gold Edith" implanted in her pale flesh. The long fingered hands, big-knuckled, competent hands, my mother's hands – one day they simply stopped moving.