

Change of Place; As her mother got older and more infirm, emotional transactions were renegotiated, guerrilla wars were waged. In the process, a family was redefined

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

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Date:	Jun 20, 1999
Start Page:	W.14
Section:	MAGAZINE

My sister's voice is on our answering machine when my husband and I get home from work. "Mother's had a stroke," she says, from 700 miles away. "I'm on my way to the hospital right now."

It's 2 a.m. when I get to the coronary care unit, in a suburban hospital outside Atlanta. My sister sits silently in a chair beside the bed, and the room is dim. Mother's face is a rigid mask. The right side of her mouth is locked in a frown, and her right arm lies swollen and useless outside the covers, an intravenous line running into a vein in her wrist. Her skin is white, paper thin; I could pierce it with my fingernail. Once, her complexion was flawless; wealthier women spent hundreds of dollars to achieve the same results she extracted from a jar of Noxema. Now fine lines trace the outlines of old smiles like cracks in crazed porcelain, and there is a short vertical crease between her eyebrows that I remember from childhood. Her hair is white, brushed back from her face in wild disarray, and her nose has been running. And she has been waiting: Her head is turned toward the door, and her eyes lock on mine. It's a look somehow both intense and unseeing. It's shocking, like catching a glimpse of her naked.

"Hello, Ma," I say, and I put my hand against her face. "You look beautiful."

And so my mother became old, and my sister and I became her caregivers.

Old age is not for sissies, they say, but what they don't say is that this is true even for the spectators. The story of a parent becoming old is not just a story about role reversal. It's a story as well about redefining an entire family, renegotiating every emotional transaction that binds you to these people you call relatives -- because when the parent becomes the child, you and your siblings become co-parents, which is a fractious marriage no court can ever dissolve. It's about playing financial roulette with your parent's economic well-being in an era when the stock market reaches dizzying heights on Tuesday, and analysts predict worldwide economic collapse on Thursday. It's about the guerrilla war you wage to get your parent to move out of the increasingly dilapidated house she can no longer care for, and the nasty game of emotional blackmail she plays to keep from going. It's about pushing your mom up airport ramps in a wheelchair while carrying your baby in a backpack, feeling your lower back threaten to give way under the combined strain and hearing your mom say, "I guess you're what they call the sandwich generation" -- and feeling thrilled, because, my God, she just made a joke.

The story I'm telling is fairly typical. My sister and I are true baby boomers; we've been surfing the crest of a demographic wave all our lives. In the 1960s we packed the elementary schools; in the 1970s and 1980s we flooded the job market. Now my sister and I are in our forties, and, as in roughly one household out of four in this country, we are taking care of an elderly relative. That's a conservative estimate; the percentage would probably be much higher if you counted the number of people who, like me, are doing this job long-distance -- dealing with everything from their parents' income taxes to a broken TV remote over the phone, and in between trying to earn a living, run their own households and cope with the vague but growing awareness that the cosmic clock is ticking for us, too.

When my mother was my age, most married women didn't have jobs, let alone careers; they stayed home and kept house. For my mother, that meant living next door to her parents, both of whom she cared for in their old age, as, later, she cared for my father's mother when she became old, too. It was an arrangement that never allowed her to pursue a dream of being a professional writer, but I don't remember ever hearing her complain. That was what families were for, each generation (of women, mostly) taking care of the one preceding it.

My sister and I took the paycheck route, pursuing careers that took us from our mother's house -- 70 miles away for my

sister, 700 for me. We were part of an exodus of some 40 million women from the home and into the paid work force between 1960 and 1996. While these vast social changes were happening, my mother continued to live in the same suburban Atlanta neighborhood where she had lived all her life. And then, one Friday afternoon, old age and infirmity suddenly descended while she was standing in line at the post office. She was 68, her husband had been dead for 13 years, her children were gone, and the social contract she'd counted on had been rewritten.

For days, she hovers near death, paralyzed on her right side and unable to speak. Her friends come, parents of my childhood playmates, looking old but strangely familiar -- Peedie Brady, Joanne Haynes, Hilma Lumsden.

"I had a stroke about a year ago," Hilma says matter-of-factly. "I can't tell it now, except that when I get tired my right leg doesn't work so well." She looks at me. "Her speech will come back, Tracy. It will." Two days later, Hilma's prediction comes true. "I wonder . . ." my mother says suddenly, startling us all. "I wonder . . ." Her voice trails off. We get pads and pencils; I buy a Speak & Spell, a toy designed to teach children the sounds of the alphabet, in hopes it will help her communicate. "You've had a stroke," we tell her. "You're in the hospital." She looks at us blankly.

At some point during the week, my old college boyfriend, now a doctor, arrives with a stack of books on stroke for me and my sister to read. They all have sensible titles: *A Guide to Understanding Stroke*. *Life After Stroke*. My sister and I look at them numbly. "I cannot believe," I say suddenly, "that out of all these books, there's not a single one named 'Different Strokes for Different Folks.'" Because my mother is so close to dying, no doubt, this seems hysterically funny.

At night, I wander through my mother's house, tidying up, cleaning out the refrigerator, looking for objects I haven't seen in years -- my prom dress, a particular cobalt blue vase. In the basement I come across a box of home movies that are water-damaged, and I pack them away, planning to see if they can be transferred to video and salvaged. I find picture albums, which I take to the hospital, trying to jump-start my mother's damaged brain. "Remember the trip to Funtown?" I say, pointing. "Remember that vacation at Callaway Gardens?" Something is happening. More words emerge; whole sections of her brain are coming back on line like neighborhoods lighting up after a blackout. Her heart rhythm stabilizes.

Death no longer seems imminent, so I go back to Washington. That leaves my sister to make the regular schlep from her home to the hospital. My sister runs a lab for a group of doctors in Newnan, 40 miles south of Atlanta; her home is 30 miles south of Newnan. The 140-mile round trip commute, combined with her job, is exhausting. Sometimes I call her to see how things are going, and my sister will say, "I haven't seen her since Tuesday." It's Thursday already! I want to scream. Don't you love your own mother? And then I say to myself: Okay, if you think it's so important, why aren't you there? At that point, because sisters can read some, but not all, of each other's thoughts, my sister gets frosty and defensive. Which means I get self-righteous and prosecutorial with my questions. Which means her answers get more terse and vague. It's an old story between us: me, the prodigal daughter who can do no wrong, versus her, the close-to-home oldest who never gets credit for anything.

My mother's speech is improving, but signs of permanent damage are becoming clearer. The name "Tommy" -- my father's name, the name of my sister's husband -- has been deleted from her memory bank. "Who's there visiting you?" I ask her on the telephone, and she says, "Your sister and . . . and . . . and . . . oh, you know." One day I call to tell her about some career milestone. She sighs. "Oh, honey, I'm so proud of you," she says. "I'd brag on you to the nurses, if I could remember your name."

Weeks pass; a month. My mother regains some movement in her right side, her speech continues to improve, and the rehab nurses start talking about discharge dates. The social worker drops by to give my sister a list of home health care agencies. Finally, the big day comes, and Mother goes home -- to a house that, because her daughters are not there to do for her what she did for her parents, now has a total stranger living in the guest room.

In the first year, personal care assistants come and go; my mother finds fault with them all. "She can't cook." "She just sits here and looks at me. Won't say a word." "She talks all the time; it's driving me crazy." "She spends all her time in the bedroom watching television. I can't get her to do a lick of work." "She barely speaks English; I can't understand a word she says." It's impossible to figure out from a distance how much of this is a problem with the workers and how much is just my mother being difficult to live with. But the real problem is beyond anyone's power to solve: Mother can no longer live alone, and she can't stand the idea of having to share her home with a stranger. Why would she?

The cost is formidable: starting at \$100 a day, and every few months the rates go up. My mother has long-term health care insurance, but the company at first refuses to honor her claim on the grounds that we are not using a "licensed" home health care agency. This is technically true; Georgia has just started licensing home health care agencies -- this is 1995 -- and the law is so new the enabling regulations haven't even been written yet. I have to threaten to hire a lawyer

and notify the state insurance commission before the company agrees to pay. By the time this problem is solved, I've spent hours on the phone and writing letters -- at the office, when I'm supposed to be working.

And solving that problem only creates more problems. Filing insurance claims requires someone to keep detailed time logs. My sister has neither the time nor the inclination for paperwork; it's all she can do to check in on my mother on a regular basis. For months, claims go unfiled. Finally, I take on that job myself, which essentially makes me a co-employer of people I don't know who work hundreds of miles away, and who for the most part take an extremely casual attitude toward time logs.

Then comes a new discovery: My mother's stockbroker, an ostentatiously devout Christian who likes closing his business meetings with prayer, has talked her into buying \$80,000 worth of highly speculative limited real estate partnerships, greatly inflating her assets on the registration form to qualify her as an investor. I panic. If this has happened, what else has gone wrong? What has happened to the trust fund my father set up to take care of my mother in her old age? I start tracking down where the rest of her investments are, which turns out to be quite difficult, since her records are in disarray and much of the information is in the hands of the broker, who is refusing to return phone calls. Even when I can corner him, I'm not sure if I'm asking the right questions -- much less if his answers make any sense. My husband, David, sees me spending hours every week on the phone, writing letters, trying to master financial intricacies for which I, clearly, have no knack.

"Why are you doing all this?" he asks. "Why are you taking so much on yourself?"

"Because it's my mother," I say tightly. "Because it's her money." Because, I add silently, I'm not there. In the end, I find out the money is intact, and still a tidy nest egg despite the praying stockbroker's decision to park most of it in lackluster mutual funds.

The greater concern is my mother's health, which continues to be precarious. As commonly happens to stroke patients during rehabilitation, she falls victim to a crippling depression. Her doctors seem strangely unconcerned about this. "Of course she's depressed," her neurologist tells me patiently, as if I'm a simpleton. "She's had a stroke." His answer leaves me speechless. My sister and I have to exert heavy pressure to make him prescribe antidepressants.

Eventually, her psychological state improves, and we find a two- person team of home health care assistants whom she likes, which helps considerably. Her physical improvement has plateaued; she can get about with the help of a walker now, but her right side is very weak. And the stroke has done major cognitive damage: Though her long-term memory is okay, her short-term memory is all but gone. She calls me three times a day, having forgotten each time that she's called already; she loses things; ordinary mail confuses and frightens her. "I've got an important financial document here and I don't know what to do with it," she says, sounding anxious and upset. It turns out to be a brochure advertising some mutual fund.

In the summer of 1996, 18 months after her stroke, David and I fly down for my mom's 70th birthday. For months, my sister has been telling me that our mother needs to move to a retirement home, and I've been resisting. From my vantage point 700 miles away, it seems to me that things are going reasonably well. But now, looking at my mother's house, I realize things are not going well at all. The yard is overgrown. The gutters haven't been cleaned in years. There are cracks in the patio concrete, a broken window pane in the living room, a constant doggy smell in the den, and a kind of household clutter so dense it's hard to find a place to put down a coffee cup. The dining room parquet shows a blotched spot where the roof has leaked, and will leak again the next time it rains. In the basement, I discover the toilet has been simply removed and the drain stopped up; when I ask why, Mother says, "Oh, I don't know. Some problem with the septic tank." The basement has flooded again, and there's a moldy smell down there I'm sure is breeding Legionnaires' disease.

It's typical of the strange way my sister and I communicate -- or fail to -- that she would have good reasons for pushing a particular course of action and not tell me what they were. Each of us, in our own way, is a control freak, and we've been competing for the Best Daughter Award since day one. It's a dynamic that has spelled misery off and on for decades.

Now, seeing the condition of my mother's house, recognizing the strain it puts on my sister and her husband to make the 70-mile trek up the interstate to get there regularly, I am forced to admit she has a point. It also makes financial sense. The market value of my mother's house is a significant part of the estate my father left her, and without major upkeep it is deteriorating before our eyes. There's only one problem: my mother. Orphaned during the Depression, she knows all she wants to know about life in institutions. The word "moving" to her means "nursing home," which is synonymous with

"hellhole." She states her objections in melodramatic terms. "I'll slit my wrists before I go," she says.

As it happens, a new, upscale retirement home is about to start construction two miles from my sister's office in Newnan, and there's a chance literally to get in on the ground floor. It's unbelievable good luck, since there's not another facility like it in a 50-mile radius. My sister and I both have my mother's power of attorney. Now we use that power for the first time to make a major financial decision: We put a 10 percent deposit of \$14,300 down on a yet-to-be- built two-bedroom apartment there.

You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to notice that the first time we manage to get together on a major decision, it is to act in direct defiance of our mother.

And that is when the battle really begins.

"I understand that you and your sister are kicking me out of my home," my mother says furiously over the telephone. My stomach instantly twists into a knot. I can picture her on the other end of the line, the set of her mouth, that frowning vertical crease between her eyes. I know she's been crying.

"You're trying to put me in an institution."

"It's not an institution. It's a retirement home. You'd have your own apartment."

"I don't need an apartment. I have a house."

"Mother, the house is falling down around your head. The roof leaks, the basement's . . ."

"You and your sister are trying to put me in an institution, and I won't have it! Do you understand me? I won't have it!"

Throughout the fall of 1996 and the winter of 1997, we have these conversations every few weeks. I keep telling my mother that nothing is set in stone, that maybe this isn't the best course, that she has some say-so here, but that she should really consider this possibility. I'm trying to play middleman. My sister, however, has given up on persuasion, opting instead for the bulldozer. I've never seen her act so decisively; in the face of my mother's tears and threats, she just keeps right on making plans.

When it comes to my mother, my sister has long been a champion of the art of passive resistance; now, for the first time in her life, she's prepared to take on my mother. It is she, not me, who gets most of the tearful phone calls, the furious denunciations, the gut-twisting accusations of neglect. And in a strange way this struggle helps us, the competing sisters, bridge a divide that has always been there, and that widened with my father's death, 15 years earlier. For the first time, we have a common goal: Do the right thing for our mother, even if we catch hell from her for it.

Weeks go by when nobody brings up the subject of Mother's future. But it's always there, a subtext of every conversation.

And then one day in November 1997 my sister calls. "I've got a date," she says. "They're opening in January 1998, so I'm thinking we ought to aim for moving Mother in February." She is characteristically blunt. Her way of dealing with powerful emotions is to adopt a kind of bravado. As for me, I lie awake that night for hours, feeling oddly forlorn. We moved into that house when I was already a junior in high school, and I've always thought of it as a pit stop on my road to adulthood. But now I realize I've underestimated its emotional pull. I got my first serious kiss there; the garage is still filled with my father's tools. I've eaten countless holiday dinners there. When you no longer have your mama's house to go home to, you are a grown-up -- a realization that still, somehow, has the power to stun me.

The calls from my mother continue, but the tone shifts subtly; she realizes there are dates, arrangements with moving companies. "When are you kicking me out?" she asks. "When are you putting me in the nursing home?"

"It is not a nursing home," I say between gritted teeth.

"I'll slit my wrists before I go. And it is a nursing home. It's a nursing home way out there in the country, in the middle of

nowhere."

Christmas comes -- my mom's last Christmas in her own house, if my sister has her way. David and I take our daughter, Emma, down to Atlanta for a big Christmas dinner at my mother's house with my cousins and their children from Chattanooga, but things are not right. My mother can't cook anymore, and my sister and I don't have time to cook, so dinner comes from the Piccadilly cafeteria -- green beans not the way my mother would have made them, corn bread not as good as hers, no chowchow for the collard greens.

A cleaning service has been through the house, leaving a disinfectant smell everywhere, but now the hallway toilet is acting strangely and the bathtub won't drain. Outside the dining room window, I can see patches of bare earth in the back yard, where my mother's dogs have worn away what used to be a lush lawn, and weeds mark the perimeter of the backyard fence. Beyond that, I know, there's a lot more land, now overgrown with brush and vegetation higher than my head.

Everyone carefully avoids mentioning anything about retirement homes. But the next morning, after the cousins have left, I once again broach the subject.

"There's nothing wrong with this house," my mother insists once again. This time, I go for the nuclear option.

"Mother," I say, "it looks like poor white trash live here."

My mother's face turns stony. She's always taught me not to be a snob; she even took offense at the comic strip "Snuffy Smith," because she thought it made fun of mountain folk. "Don't ever let me hear you making fun of hillbillies or poor white trash," she'd say. "You just remember: That's where you come from." But at the same time, she's always been self-conscious about having grown up in poverty, as I well know. I could not have devised a nastier remark.

"Well, thank you very much, Miss Priss," she says icily. We sit in silence for a few moments.

"Come on, Ma," I say, holding out my hand. "Let's at least go look at it."

We make the 40-minute drive to the retirement home mostly in silence. A couple of times my mother makes pointed remarks about how long it's taking and how far out in the boonies we are. When we arrive, the home's director, Terry Thompkins, is waiting for us. A tall, dark-haired man who speaks in the gentle Southern cadences of the Methodist preacher he still is, he's here on his Christmas holiday at my special request to give us a tour. My mother, whom I have never seen behave with conscious rudeness to anyone, greets him as if he had just poisoned her dog. With a mild flourish, he opens the door to the residential wing where my mother's apartment will be. The building's unfinished, and elsewhere workmen are still tracking red mud everywhere, but this corridor is thickly carpeted, painted in pastels, with muted recessed lighting and little nooks here and there that hold flower arrangements. The overall effect is much like a hallway at the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Atlanta.

"It looks like an institution," my mother snaps.

Thompkins stops and puts his hand over his heart. "Miz Thompson, don't say that," he says. "You just hurt my feelings."

"Well, it's too bad about your feelings. It looks like an institution." Standing behind my mother, I roll my eyes at him and shrug. By now we're at the door of the new apartment, which Thompkins opens.

A pale December sun spills through the living room window, which overlooks an expanse of impossibly green new sod. It's not big, but everything is clean and beige and modern, from the kitchen appliances to the carpet in the two bedrooms. My mother looks through the rooms with an expression on her face like she's tracking a bad smell, but says nothing. And that, more than anything, tells me what I want to know: She can't find anything wrong. It's better than she expected -- better, in fact, than the vast majority of elderly people in this country could ever hope to have. She is lucky to be able to afford a place like this, and she knows it.

She doesn't speak for the entire ride back. But I know she is grieving. First her health, then her car and her independence, then her privacy. Now her home.

That was two years ago.

The retirement home is finished now -- though already planning to expand -- and lovely, as these places go, with a grand piano in the lobby and an oil portrait over the fireplace. But nobody would mistake it for real home: The books on the shelves are rarely in use, and the sofas have a stiff, unused feel to them. Meals are served in a dining room overlooking a courtyard where people rarely walk, at the center of which is a gazebo where people rarely sit. The shade trees -- essential in this broiling Georgia climate -- are still saplings. It will be a while before it looks like anything more than just a huge building in the middle of a cow pasture.

Is my mother happy? I don't know. I mine our conversations now for clues, and every once in a while I hear something that makes me think she is adjusting. "I'm going to have to borrow an ironing board from one of my friends upstairs," she said the other day, and I thought, She's made new friends! I've made several trips to see her with my daughter, who seems to enchant the old ladies and gives my mother something to talk about. My sister is able to drop by several times a week on her lunch hour. On the surface, at least, things look fine.

But on a recent night, my mother calls me to say that, after months of major repairs and more months of sitting vacant on the market, her old house has finally found a buyer. "A door is closing," she says, and she sounds melancholy. She misses her dogs, her comfortable clutter; I suspect that the sanitized, protected life we have created for her will never feel right. "I keep wondering: Where will I go from here?" she says. "Oh, Ma," I say. "The only way you'll ever leave that place is feet first," and she laughs, and then I try to distract her with stories about Emma.

"What was the happiest time of your life?" I asked my mother once, years ago.

"When you girls were little." Her tone was: naturally. Why would you not know that?

The home movies I managed to salvage from my mother's basement are from that time. In them, she is a slender young mother with coppery hair, presiding at birthday parties, squinting from the hot movie lights on long-ago Christmas mornings. Watching these images, I get the feeling that time is an illusion, that somewhere in the universe these events are still happening. Old friends return in these blotched, flickery frames, laughing soundlessly. There's Marion, my mother's best friend, with my mother in a backyard cookout scene from the summer of 1955. Their bellies are ripe with me and Susie, who will become my first best friend.

Marion and my mother have stayed in touch through the years. She lives in San Antonio now and, like my mother, is a widow. I had not spoken to her in 30 years, but last winter I was in Texas and, on impulse, I called her. Can I come see you? Oh, yes, she said quickly. I was amazed at how familiar her voice sounded, as if I had just heard it the week before.

So one afternoon, I drove to her upscale neighborhood, pulled into the circular driveway of a nice house and knocked on the door. From inside I heard quick steps running down the hall -- and then the door flew open and there she was, eyes alight, looking just like the Marion I remembered from that happy time in my mother's life, except that her hair was gray.

"It's Tracy!" she exclaimed, and as I stepped into her motherly embrace, I suddenly missed my own mother in a way I hadn't since childhood. Nostalgia had brought me there, I realized -- a bittersweet longing for a time when, to a child's eye, my mother's life was uncomplicated and serene, when she succeeded for a time in creating for my sister and me the illusion that the world was a bubble of perfect love and safety. Now that her hair is white and her days an unremitting regimen of pills and physical indignity, I wish I could return the favor. I wish I could make her old age as easy for her as she made childhood for me.

When I got home, I called my mother to tell her about my visit. "Oh," she said, and sighed. "I wish I could have been there with you." Then we talked some more about other things -- about money matters and the new curtains my sister had ordered for my mother's bedroom and the nagging pain in my mother's back. And behind my eyes I could feel the weight of tears I have not shed, but will.

Tracy Thompson last wrote for the Magazine about a mental patient's effort to reenter the work force.

[Illustration]

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