

INSPIRED

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A Vision That Is Mine

by [Thelma Fayle](#)
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Photo credit: Daryl Jones

“I have too many fingers,” she said, with sleepy eyelids drooping as she stood by the bathroom sink. I laughed for a change, and teased her for being a wimp. Imagine complaining about having too many fingers to dry! She grinned the way she used to; and then, just as suddenly, uncertainty reappeared on her overtired face. Loose rings jangled as she slowly rubbed the towel over each long bony finger.

Taking rickety baby-steps, Mom pushed the walker toward her bedroom. We thought she still recognized her own bright-eyed picture on the door; but who knows. Signs taped around the house were useless to a scrabble player who could no longer read. If only the signs could talk: “Extra toilet paper over here.” “Did you put your hearing aids in?” “Walker Parking.”

My sibs and I, a motley imperfect crew, were grateful she was not one of those elders trapped in a nursing home while visitors with aggrieved faces waved at masked-up seniors in wheelchairs – through windows – while trying to conduct fake-cheery-chats on passed-around cell phones.

Six adult-kids hoped she would reach the milestone birthday only months away. “You can do it Mom; make it to a hundred,” each of us silently chanted – even though her body was forgetting the drill and would soon fail to recall how to pump blood, open eyes, and fill lungs with air.

That morning, driving to my sister’s house, I felt as if I were in an old Twilight Zone episode. Like most cities through the early pandemic days, Victoria roads were eerily vacant.

Mom sat on the edge of her single bed in a floral flannel nightgown humming while I brushed her hair. She was one of the lucky ones who got even sweeter with dementia. I made oatmeal for her, we drank Red Rose tea and we admired the red geraniums outside. We were down to tiny words in our small talk.

Numb with “anticipatory grief” (one of the home-hospice nurse’s terms), I had been paying apt attention to what I knew would be remaining days. I learned to administer the painkiller injection, but on first effort, the valuable vial of morphine squirted across her favourite pink-purple-blue blanket. The ironic-miss targeted mum’s life-long aversion to taking medication – likely one of the reasons she lived so long. Thelma Sr. once predicted – and even hoped – she might live to 117.

Tucking her in, I reminded her I didn’t know anyone who was as well-loved as she was. For a long time, she would look at me with suspicion and say: “Is that so?” And I would reassure her. But on this day, she smiled and said: “I’ve heard that.”

And then the awful question came: “What’s your name?” she asked.

Like a boot to the “backside” (one of Mom’s terms), her pivotal question threw me. There is little warning or advice for the unfamiliar new world dementia caretakers have come to inhabit.

I managed to give her a wide, warm, slow-motion, fake smile. “My name is Thelma,” I said. The dementia specialists recommended a steadily offered supply of smiles and simple-chats to help ease dementia patients’ fear of their often-scary and unfamiliar new world.

“Wow, what are the chances?” she replied with widened eyes. And then, with the sweetest shyness, she introduced herself. “My name is Thelma too.”

Driving home slower than usual, I listened to weirdly jarring jazz on the radio. I wasn't a particular fan; but grating, discordant and disturbing sounds happened to be on the station --and fit the moment.

I realized I needed to have something to look forward to. Don't we all?

After mulling for a week, I checked out UKings school of journalism (Dalhousie). The program offered residencies in Toronto, New York and Halifax but because of the pandemic they would likely be organizing zoom lectures with brilliant guest speakers, talented mentors and discussion groups. The faculty seemed a collaborative lot.

I decided to apply for the MFA as a celebration of turning 65 – with a goal of becoming a better writer.

I explained to Admissions that I was involved in a care-taking role, unsure of when I might be available, and asked if I stood a chance of getting accepted. I paid the fee, sent in my application, and went back to helping my mother. I had no control over timing.

Mom lived six days past her 100th birthday and I was shocked to get a letter nine weeks later: Congratulations and Welcome to the Class of 2023!

I bought three little, old-fashioned alarm clocks and lined them up on my desk with block-lettered-notes below each one. VICTORIA – TORONTO – HALIFAX. With profs, mentors, and classmates in different cities, I didn't want to get the time zone wrong and miss something.

Pre-residency, reading-assignment craft-books piled up. I read my head off. How the hell had I never encountered these sensational books before?

One thing made me nervous. As part of the dwindling 16 per cent of humans on the planet, I do not have a smart phone or a speck of social media interest.

Friends who sleep with their phones, shake their heads as if I were the old lady living in an Instagram-less shoe.

"You can't be a writer without participating in social media," they say. Maybe they are right.

After most lectures in my first residency, I ran upstairs and described the gist of another incredible presentation.

My husband, Daryl, had meals ready precisely when classes were over. I never imagined being so well-supported in a goal. I rarely did the dishes for two years.

I handed in assignments early. Sometimes weeks early. I said I didn't care about marks, but when I got an A+ on a research paper, I ran screaming through the house. A+A+A+

Halfway through the program, I bumped into an old colleague. When I said I was a full-time student, he widened his eyes with fake alarm and with edgy exaggerated emphasis asked: “To what end?”

He didn’t say “at your age,” but I heard it. He didn’t get that I was trying to pursue a vision that was truly mine. He didn’t get that I have ideas about books I hope to write – if I live as long as my mother did.

Some days it can be hard to understand people.

When we finally met in person at the Halifax graduation, I encountered the talented, full-bodied classmates who had only appeared as heads and torsos on my computer screen for two years. We were strangers, but we weren’t. They were the beautiful non-fiction writers who loved writing as much as I did.

I bought the sterling silver grad ring – with the university coat-of-arms – to wear 24/7 as a pinky ring.

If engineers can wear rings to remind them of their responsibilities as builders, I think narrative-nonfiction writers can wear them for the same reason. Writers also have responsibilities as builders.

Thelma Fayle Sr. would have appreciated the thinking behind the ring on one of my many fingers.

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