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# Death in Dreamland



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by C. Flisi

When my mother died at the age of 91, we had many unresolved issues between us. They were unresolved in part because my mom had a roller coaster personality: things for her were either way up or way down and there was seldom the opportunity to work things out satisfactorily. Resolution became impossible in the last decade of her life as Alzheimer's took over her mind. I would visit her and think of the film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and accept that my mother wasn't really there at all.

So when she died in a nursing home, drugged to the gills, not recognizing me or any member of our family except her husband (my father), I cried. I felt guilty about my anger during the previous 10 years when I hadn't realized she had Alzheimer's and thought she was being wilfully selfish and stubborn. She alternated bouts of kindness and cruelty and my reaction to the latter had been intolerance and antagonism. Her response to my hostility had been incomprehension. I reacted with deeper anger because I didn't KNOW her mind was going AWOL, not for several more years anyway.

Mom died on a May 1. On July 31, I had an "autistic" dream. (Many of my dreams are what psychologists call "autistic" because they are utterly realistic, not symbolic. I don't have a lot of imagery in my dreams and the actions, time sequences, settings all correspond to real-life situations.)

In my dream I was visiting the neighbourhood where I grew up near Princeton, New Jersey, a place I had not visited in many decades. I was a grown woman, the age I was when Mom died, yet I wasn't surprised about being in that place. But I wasn't at OUR house. I was at a home three houses down from where we lived. When I was a kid, a family called the Lovejoys had lived there. The Lovejoys were long gone but the people who were living there let me in to look around. I asked them how long they had been in the home. "About five years," they said. "Oh, that's far too recent for you to have known the Lovejoys, who lived here 50 years ago," I replied.

I looked around their house, explaining to them that I had lived nearby as a child. Although I don't remember what the Lovejoy interior looked like, in the dream I said to myself, "This looks a lot like my home when I, a grown woman with a family of my own, lived in Fort Lee, New Jersey. Isn't that strange?" There was a lot of wood paneling and the rooms were small with the kind of windows we had in Fort Lee. It made me happy to be reminded of my "adult" home on Dearborn Road, but I knew (in the dream) that something wasn't right because the one house shouldn't have looked so much like the other.

I started telling the homeowners (a couple in their 40s) about Joan Lovejoy and how she used to work outside in the back yard restoring antique furniture. I told them that my mother had

always spoken admiringly of Joan because during the day Joan would be working outside, dressed in old clothes with no makeup, her long bleached-blond hair pinned back, doing this restoration, and then in the evening she would go to the local country club with her husband Dirk and she would be dressed to the nines, high heels and makeup, hair swept up in some elegant way.

My mother had been like that too. She wore clothes well, easy for her as a former model. She was not quite so casual during the day, nor did she have a country club social life on the weekends, but she always looked well-put-together — makeup, jewelry, scarves, and accessories just so. She had nothing to envy with Joan or any of our neighbors.

While I was telling the couple about Joan, I heard a familiar voice in the background. The voice was talking to me, sort of echoing what I was saying about the Lovejoys, and after a few seconds I realized it was Mom's voice. It wasn't Mom's voice of recent years (fading in the last two, and pretty manic-depressive, alternating saccherin and psychosis, for the previous 10 or so), but Mom's voice of THAT time, of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The voice was very close, so I looked around. I was outside of the Lovejoy's house, in the driveway of their back yard (where Joan used to work) and I looked north — the direction of our home —

though what I saw was the lawn of the adjoining home. Was that the Cunningham place?

Mom was on the lawn between the Cunninghams and our old home. She was wearing a long flowing bathrobe, the kind she favored, and she looked as she had looked back then, pretty, happy, relaxed, with long dark wavy hair. Not bitter or phobic or defensive as she became (or as I later saw her to be), but simple, as a child sees a mother, smiling, and radiating love.

In the dream I said to myself, calmly and matter-of-factly, “But Mom is dead. This is only a vision of Mom, probably the result of my being here where I spent my childhood.” I wasn’t aware that I was dreaming (as I am sometimes in my dreams) but I did know that Mom’s appearance was dreamlike.

The incongruity didn’t bother me because I accepted the logic of why she had appeared. I knew she wasn’t “real” but she wasn’t a ghost either. Within the dream I thought about the scene near the end of my favourite childhood story, *Half Magic*, when Jane has a dream about her long-dead “real” father and he gives his approval for her mother’s remarriage to Mr. Smith. Within the context of MY dream, I thought that Mom’s appearance was a little like the dream within that story.

I went to her and she opened her arms and I hugged her (direct,

with open heart, uncomplicated, as I had when I was a child). She sounded real and she smelled real and she felt real. I don't recall her saying anything meaningful; she didn't say "I love you" and she didn't call me by my childhood nickname, "Cookie," or anything like that. But I was so happy to see her again, the mom I had loved as a child, the mom I hadn't seen in decades.

I woke up feeling very upbeat. I wondered briefly about the symbolism in the dream. Were the Lovejoys a part of it because of their name? Was my home on Dearborn Road evoked because of the symbolism in that name as well? Was the timing of the dream significant — a day shy of three months since my mother had died? Not three months to the day because my older sister's birthday was July 31, and she had died five years earlier.

What is that much-maligned term . . . closure? In some magical inexplicable way Mom came to me at her warmest and most wonderful in a context brimming with happy childhood memories. It was her final gift to me — closing out our complicated relationship in a positive and beautiful way.

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