

Aunt BJ

Laurie McCort

My sister and I are going to visit my Aunt who has end stage Alzheimer's disease. Although mentally prepared for this outing, I have to ready myself for the lack of connection with the woman who taught me the importance of laughter and singing. My Aunt BJ, who on Saturday nights would grab an umbrella for a cane and, along with my mother, dance to old show tunes to the delight of us kids. I am prepared to go find my Aunt BJ in a room that seems wrapped in heat, smelling of old people with distant looks. I understand that she is eating very little now, spending most of her time sleeping. I am ready and we plan only to stay a few minutes. I just need to touch her and then we can go.

My sister and I enter the nursing home through the front foyer. Several of the folks are sitting at tables with American flag stickers on their clothes and the more awake are wearing top hats with red, white, and blue on them. One lady is asleep, sitting in her wheel chair with her arm extended, holding a drinking glass. Suspended in time, she rests easily among all the noise. My Aunt is among this group. She is up and eating. An aide is feeding her a pureed lunch of baked beans, hot dogs, and carrots. Her complexion is smooth and soft with the natural color of her youth. I take over the feeding for the aide and my Aunt BJ opens her mouth for a spoonful of food like a tiny bird. I stroke her cheek and kiss her forehead and encourage my fledgling to finish her pureed hot dog. Her eyes are searching for something in my face she can remember. There is a volunteer playing the accordion, weaving in-between the older people, encouraging everyone to sing along. They don't understand his request. They do not connect. Only my sister and I sing. The accordion player loves our participation and gets more

animated. It's so contagious that we in turn sing louder. Some of the elderly wake and they start to smile. From the next room appears a very large male aide in his green scrubs and he starts to dance in front of the group. His grace and style is astounding. He is a New York City Rockette out of space and time. "Just call me Diva," he croons.

"Give her some applesauce," the aide passing by interjects, "She'll eat better if you give her something sweet." But it's not necessary. My Aunt has connected somehow to the touch on her cheek, or perhaps it's the music, and she is taking all her food. Now the Diva is skipping around the room to "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy," slapping his rump as if he is riding a horse, and the accordion player is giving a running narrative, "Oh, I love the horse thing."

My sister and I sing louder. I personally will my Aunt to finish her food. Let this be just a little thing I can do for her. The Diva pirouettes. Holding the food cart for support, he struts and swings his leg above his head in a high kick. My Aunt BJ is almost finished with all her food, except for her carrots. When I try to feed her carrots she closes her mouth in a solid lock and I cheer her ability to exert her will. I don't like carrots either. Now the Diva is going down in a slow split, and the accordion player, my sister, and I groan at how he will pay

for that later. I continue to kiss my Aunt on her forehead as she takes her last bites. I feel I have connected in some soulful way that only parental instincts can understand. The accordion player finishes his last song. The Diva limps off and the aide tells me its time for my Aunt's nap. Thank you, Aunt BJ, for reminding me of what is truly significant.

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