Ever BLOOM

STORIES *of* LIVING DEEPLY ROOTED AND TRANSFORMED LIVES

by women of
Redbud
WRITERS GUILD

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The Best We Can
by Taryn Hutchison

I set the take-out lunch on my parents' wobbly table, pushing aside pill bottles, lists scribbled on envelopes, and extra pairs of glasses.

"Your daughter's here!" Mom yells down the hallway. Dad's hearing aids are on the fritz, as usual.

"He probably can't hear you," I say for the umpteenth time. "I'll get him."

We meet in the hallway as he wheels himself to the table.

"It's about time! I'm half-starved," my father bellows.

The clock reads 10:30. My parents rise by 4:00 and eat breakfast as soon as they can after taking the first of many pills.

My mother stands, immobile, fridge door open.

"Mom, sit. I'll get the drinks." I busy myself in the one-person kitchen.

"Thanks, honey."

I set down Dad's plate. He immediately takes a bite.

Mom looks at him. "Where are your manners?"

"Huh?"

"You need to wait."

"It's just Taryn."

"Well, that's—"

"Mom, it's fine." I play referee.

I serve up the rest and face my father, speaking loudly and clearly. "You feeling okay about tomorrow?" He will have a carcinoma, and the top of his ear, removed.

"Guess so."

"Well, I'm not," Mom pipes up. "Medicare won't cover it all, and I don't know where we'll get the money. And the next procedure—"

"Mom, don't worry. We can help you."

"Huh?"

"Honestly! Mom. Be patient."

"Patient? That's all I am. Tired of it. I'm old, too." Mom tears up and turns her head away.

I catch Dad's eye. "You'll be like our cat. Tomcats bite notches out of each other's ears. It's their badge of honor."

"Oh boy."

"After tomorrow, the next time will be a snap. You'll be an old pro."

"Next what?" Dad asks.

"I told you. Don't you listen? Don't pretend you forgot!" Mom's voice becomes shrill.

My father cups his hands, shaking from Parkinson's, around his eyes. He hunches forward from osteoporosis. The right side of his body doesn't work well after two strokes. My once-strong father looks frail.

I turn to Mom. "Maybe you told him when he couldn't hear you."

Then I pivot toward my father. "Dad, in two weeks, they'll take another tiny carcinoma off your shoulder. That one'll be easy."

"Why can't they do both tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Good question."

"Because they want to drive me crazy. They want us to go to the poor house. I never wanted to be a nurse, and that's what I've become." Mom's voice rises another octave.

"Mom, do you really think your children will let you starve?" I sigh and collect my thoughts. "Hasn't God always taken care of you? Why would he stop now?"

"You think I worry." Her chin quivers. "But I'm just being a realist."

I get up to clear the table. To my mother I say, "It'll all work out."
To my father, "I'll pray for you tomorrow."
I climb into my car and give way to my tears.

I used to have a large life. I lived abroad and accumulated passport stamps the way others collect shells. After a decade, I returned, partly because of my parents' declining health. I grieved, and still grieve, the loss of my world overseas.

As one of their two children, I volunteered for this. Caregiving usually falls on daughters, and I hadn't paid my dues yet; I never raised a child. I also felt the tiniest bit of guilt because I spent my parents' last good-health decade overseas. My expat missionary adventures cost them—worrying about me in unstable countries during volatile times, missing me—while I blissfully ignored my biological clock winding down.

And so I came home. After my father's quadruple bypass surgery and mother's cardiomyopathy, it wasn't enough to live in the same country; I needed to be closer. My husband and I relocated again, to a town affordable enough for my still-independent parents, and a house large enough to include them, if needed.

Shortly after moving, my father had a major stroke. Mom takes care of him, and we are only a three-minute drive away. My brother helps with financial advice and often shows up with the latest electronic gadget, hoping it'll simplify their lives. It doesn't. New technology just frustrates them. They don't want to see their grandchildren on FaceTime; they want to see them face-to-face.

My world has shrunk. I can't go far, at least not for long.

I first noticed something wrong with my grandmother as a middle schooler. My family lived in a century-old farmhouse; she, recently widowed, lived next door in the small stucco house my grandfather built.

Grandmom puttered around alone all day, drawn to anything living. She had the greenest thumb around and knew the name of every tree. I can remember watching her sturdy four-foot, ten-inch frame haul a huge trunk of a tree she'd cut down by herself. Our dog and cats flocked to her as though she wore a catnip-scented T-bone around her neck. Every Sunday she'd cook a feast, usually pot roast, making a well in my mashed potatoes to fill with creamed corn, just the way I liked it. Afterward we'd have her cake—the best in the world. She invented a frosting just for me with mashed-up peppermint patties.

When our school bus dropped us off, Grandmom would wander over to help me start dinner. She'd weave wonderful stories, taking strands from her childhood in a large German immigrant family in central Pennsylvania and strands from the present, blending the two into one magnificent mess. I remember peeling potatoes and Grandmom demonstrating how to guide the knife toward myself with my thumb. As I perfected my new skill, which did give me more control, she turned the gas burner on and never lit it. When I found her outside, her eyes looked cloudy and confused.

I'd never heard the term *Alzheimer's* before.

Before the disease asserted complete control, we put my grandmother on a plane to visit her daughter far away. My aunt never sent her back. I didn't get to say good-bye to Grandmom. I never asked her how to grow things or make peppermint-patty icing.

What motivates children to take care of parents in their waning years?

Love? Usually.

Guilt? Sometimes.

Family obligation? Always.

I remember Mom fixing my first sewing project—an apron that had me knotted in frustration—while I slept. She invented Color Bingo. I think of her stories. Her creativity. I could count on her to come to every performance, every school activity. She knew more than anyone, won every trivia game, and could talk on any subject.

Dad worked long hours, never made it to any school activities, but afterward, he beamed when I played the piano or recited my lines, just for him. He had skilled hands. He broke a lot of things, but at least he could fix them. He always had an extra twenty-dollar bill to slip me. His regular greeting, "Your car okay?" really meant "I love you," the best way he knew how to say it.

I never doubted it. From either of my parents.

And now. They don't even know the names of my friends. They don't seem to care. Every conversation features them. Their health. Their doctor appointments. Their financial worries. This isn't who they once were.

Sometimes my husband brings pizza to watch sports with Dad, while I take Mom away for a much-needed break. After these outings, she feels refreshed, but I feel more burdened.

My parents have divvied out their treasures to children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces—whenever they see them, never often enough. Mom has filled volumes of scrapbooks with old photographs and memories. She wants her life and her heritage to live on.

My father watches his body fall apart, powerless to halt it. His eyesight. His hearing. He grows feebler every week. He told me he has something for me and my brother in his Bible, just in case. "If you can ever find it," he said.

Mom's issues are more emotional. Her agility makes her appear younger than her age. Medication controls her heart condition. As

a Depression baby, she's always worried about money, but lately it's gotten to the point that it seems irrational.

If my husband and I go away, we line up local people in case of an emergency. I can get away from town, but I can't get away from the suffocating shadow of responsibility. When I start to enjoy myself and stop thinking about them, I feel a stab of guilt because of my selfishness.

I try to be selfless and end up dwelling on myself.

What will happen to me when I'm their age? The threat of Alzheimer's haunts me. Sometimes I wonder if I got my master's degree in writing in my fifties to stave it off or prove I don't have it.

I have no children to be the focus of my care. My stepchildren, young adults when I entered the family, have two parents, and I'm not one of them. I found true love too late in life for children.

Then there's my stuff. My artwork. Books marked with notes. Treasures gleaned from countries that no longer exist, a bygone world that still courses like blood through my veins.

Will anyone want these things? Will they want them *because* they're mine? Or will my belongings become a thankless burden, doled out to those who'll never know their stories, never feel their love?

I watch over my parents' final years. Someday I'll do the same for my husband. Who—if anyone—will be there for me?

The first time this fear gripped my heart in its clammy hands, I turned to God. I cried, and he listened. Then he gently reminded me of Isaiah 46:4 (NASB):

> Even to your old age I will be the same,
> And even to your graying years I
> will bear you!

> I have done it, and I will carry you;
> And I will bear you and I will deliver you.

Calm replaced worry that day. I don't need to know the details. *How. When. Who.* All that matters is that God's the one. *He* will do it.

I need to heed the advice I dispense like gumballs to my mother. *Do not fear.* But how? That beloved verse in Isaiah 41:10 (NASB) has the antidote: "For I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God."

I'm transported back to the night the Russian Mafia broke into my flat when I lived alone in Hungary. I repeated those same words, heart racing, until I finally drifted to sleep. Fear began to dissipate when I focused on God instead of what had happened.

Hasn't God always taken care of me? Do I think he'll stop?

Now when I feel anxious, I know what to do. I remember who God is. I rehearse the times I've sensed his palpable presence. I thank him for promising to strengthen and help me. I trust.

My calling in this season includes caring for my parents. This *is* my life. It may not be dramatic, but my voice can rise, unmuted. I can still pick up my pen, type on my keyboard, with new words.

My parents' love for us came through in action. They were present. They were involved. They did the best they could.

That's what I want to emulate. I will be present.

With God's help, I'll do the best I can.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, help me remember your tender care in the past, thank you for your presence today, and believe that you will take care of me in the future. Amen.

WRITING PROMPT

Describe a time you were called to be a caregiver and how God tended to your soul.