

States of the Union

LONG-TERM CARING

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

I'm getting rather too old to live alone in winter and I'd rather live in community. At Oxford, I should be missed if I failed to turn up at at meals.

—W.H. AUDEN AT AGE 65

I am done with great things and big plans, great institutions and big success. And I am for those tiny invisible loving human forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets... yet which, if given time, will rend the hardest monuments of human pride.

—WILLIAM JAMES

SHE MAY have known she was slipping long before my brother and I found out. How could we tell? For us she was always "on." Our visits did more than brighten her hours—they sharpened her wits. But afterward, when Phil had returned to Michigan and I to Connecticut, and she was alone again in those silent rooms, she must have had plenty of time to think about it, and to worry.

Once she gripped my arm and demanded: "Promise me one thing. No matter what happens, never condescend to me. I couldn't stand that."

"Mother, don't talk that way. What could happen to you?"

"Just promise," she insisted. And I promised.

We noticed it first with the bills. For as long as we could remember she had taken scrupulous care of her accounts, sitting at the maplewood desk and writing checks with her favorite pen, the kind you had to pump ink into. She had been proud of her rounded, graceful script, and of her bookkeeping talents. But now the script looked unfamiliar, *angular*, and the columns in the check-book never seemed to add up.

More and more she found herself walking over to the Grand Avenue bank and asking Mr. Gottschalk—"that nice young man whose desk is on a rug"—to balance her totals. To us she made a joke of it. "Poor Mr. Gottschalk," she would say. "Whenever he sees me coming he puts his head in his hands. I can just hear him muttering, 'Oh, God, here comes that crazy old lady again.'"

The walk to the bank was only three blocks, but for Mother that was a great distance. Her hip pained her—calcium deposits, her doctor had said—and she had to use a cane. In time a second cane became necessary, and then a walker. No more visits to Mr. Gottschalk. The bills accumulated. And they began to turn up in unexpected places—in kitchen

drawers, inside magazines, beneath pillows.

Phil and I decided to take regular turns going to St. Paul. One of us would show up near the first of each month. We would stay long enough to help Mother write the checks, and to take her to "The Lex," her favorite restaurant. The next day, or even that same night, we would return to our wives and our children, plunging back into the main currents of our lives.

One morning I kissed Mother goodbye, got a taxi to the airport and boarded a plane homeward. When I walked into the house six hours later, Diane was on the telephone. She gave me a funny look and handed me the receiver.

"Where ever *are* you?" Mother was asking. "You said you'd be here. I stayed up half the night waiting."

I reminded her of my visit, of our parting that very morning, and for a moment she seemed to get it all in focus. Then she lost it. "Naturally, I'm disappointed," she informed me in rational tones, "but I do understand. I know how busy you are."

I shed tears that night on Diane's shoulder. They were mourner's tears, for I felt that a part of my mother had died. After that, when I went to St. Paul I tried to stay an extra night or two.

My brother is a doctor. On one of his visits he took Mother to see a neurologist, someone my brother had gone to medical school with. The neurologist was very thorough. He took pictures of Mother's brain; he flexed her limbs and tested her reflexes. Then he asked her some questions: *What day is this? When were you born? Who is President of the United States?*

Phil called me the next day. "Her brain cells are dying," he said. "It happens sometimes. They say it's irreversible." I tried to picture a billion fireflies inside Mother's head. One by one they were winking out.

I hung up and dialed St. Paul. "How did it go at the doctor's, Mother?"

She laughed. "He asked me a lot of silly questions. Why would he care when I was born? Why would anyone care—it happened so long ago."

Our trips to St. Paul were taking on

greater importance. It wasn't just the bills any more; it was something harder to deal with—a mysterious change of rhythm, a turn in Mother's personal weather. She seldom went out now, not even to buy groceries. Sometimes the refrigerator was empty. Her Wednesday canasta game with "the girls," a social occasion she had relished, was a thing of the past. We guessed that the arithmetic of the cards had become too much for her. Once I asked her why she didn't play any more. "Oh," she snapped uncharacteristically, "they all talk too much."

Her life seemed to be shrinking before our eyes. We noticed that the telephone, which in our youth had seemed a veritable extension of Mother's personality, rarely rang. Why should it? Her closest friends were gone: Alice and Harriet dead; Rose in California, living with her daughter Phyllis; Josephine and Saul in a Florida condominium, and Saul dying of cancer.

Mother was spending a lot of time in her bedroom now, the room furthest back in the house. The living room remained dark, the drapes drawn tight. Mail and newspapers lay in a pile on the front porch. Phil or I sifted through them once a month.

Worse was to come. Suddenly Mother's daily routine, all the little domestic acts the rest of us took for granted, seemed freighted with danger. One evening she went to bed without turning off the oven. She might have died, but around midnight the tenants upstairs smelled smoke and banged on Mother's door. A close call.

Another time she was unable to climb out of the bathtub. She lay in the gray water for five hours, until Anna, her once-a-month cleaning woman, let herself in with a key we'd given her and rescued Mother.

We knew that Anna's fortuitous appearance could not be counted on again. Something had to be done—but what? In situations like this wasn't the community supposed to help? What had become of all those caring organizations Mother had once been a part of—the auxiliaries, the sisterhoods, the charities that had kept her phone ringing all day?

Wasn't it their turn to give something back?

Phil and I had grown up in that social-service milieu, yet now we did not know where to turn. We began telephoning our old friends, asking them to look in on Mother from time to time. They were sympathetic, and they tried their best; but they had much else to do. We called local agencies. Did they offer home care services that Mother could use? Well, yes and no: yes for short-term care of the sick, no for long-term care of the frail; yes for once or twice a week, no for every day.

Phil called Mother's family doctor, Milt, another friend. "Your mother can't take care of herself," Milt said. "She belongs in The Home where she can get the best of care. You boys have been putting it off too long."

The Home! People went there when they had nowhere else to go. Mother had served on its boards and committees, had raised money for it, had called on its residents many a Sunday. She and her friends had been proud of the institution they had helped to build. It was thought to be the best in the state—the finest doctors and nurses, the most up-to-date services, the cleanest corridors. Still, Mother would return from those Sunday visits shaking her head. "Poor Della," she would say. "Poor Celia.... Poor Mrs. Buxbaum...." The Home, I had learned early on, was nobody's happy ending.

Milt's advice jolted us into action, though. Against Mother's will, we ordered Meals-on-Wheels for her. At least she would not go hungry. Then we called a college in the area and got a graduate student, a woman from Israel, to live with Mother rent-free in exchange for a few services—shopping, cooking, just being there. The young woman seemed pleased to have found us. She smiled at Mother, who did not smile back. "I like my privacy," Mother told us. But she let us have our way.

Or did she? Early one morning I got a long-distance call from a St. Paul police sergeant. Mother had charged the Israeli woman with stealing her jewels. They

had been up all night, and the stunned woman had left the house at dawn, in tears. None of us ever saw her again.

There followed a sad procession of "companions"—practical nurses, teenage sitters and part-time "homemakers" supplied by commercial enterprises we'd found listed in the Yellow Pages. At first we were very careful: We interviewed each applicant and sought Mother's opinion. But soon the circumstances overwhelmed us. From thousands of miles away, by telephone, we tried to piece together the splintered logistics of home care. Our goal by then was to have someone in the house with Mother 24 hours a day, seven days a week. No single agency, it seemed, and certainly no one individual, sufficed to fill all the time-slots.

And if any had, would it have mattered? We knew, but never let on, that in the long run neither Mother nor we could afford the around-the-clock services we were so frantically seeking.

There was always the possibility that Mother would consent to live with one of us. It wasn't what she wanted—after more than half a century in St. Paul she couldn't picture herself anywhere else—but her choices were narrowing. Phil pressed harder than I. He went to St. Paul and took mother back with him to Ann Arbor. She should try it, he told her. She could stay as long as she wished. The next morning he found her standing in the front vestibule, impatiently tapping her foot. Her bags were packed. Phil took her to the airport.

We went back to our scheduling circus and awaited the inevitable. It came one Monday morning. The homemaker had failed to show up Sunday night and Mother was alone. She must have walked in her sleep. The paper boy found her in her nightgown, lying in a puddle of vomit on the cement porch floor. It was March and still cold in Minnesota. Fearing that Mother might have caught pneumonia, the police took her by ambulance to the hospital.

That afternoon my brother and I were back in St. Paul. We went to the hospital. Mother was all right. Then we got into our rented car. Very slowly, as in a cortege, we drove out to The Home.