States of the Union

LIFE AND DEATH AT 'THE HOME'

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

MOTHER lies in a coma now most of the time, her eyes wide-open and childlike. Occasionally her eyelashes flutter and she awakens. Then Lorraine raises Mother's head and brings a glass straw to her lips. "Here's some water, dear. Aren't you thirsty?" It has been nearly a week since Mother has eaten anything solid.

Her breathing is slow and relaxed, though once in a while she emits a great sigh—of forbearance, perhaps, or of impatience. I have no way of knowing. Everything I am witness to here is a mystery.

The room has two other beds in it. One is empty and stripped down to its stained mattress. The other barely seems occupied. Rebecca, a tiny woman who never removes her pink anklets, sleeps all day atop the smooth Dacron blanket, her marionette legs and arms folded tight like a baby's. Rebecca is no bother to anyone, yet I resent her presence.

In the beginning, more than four years ago, my brother Phil and I kept pestering the Director and the Head Nurse to transfer Mother to a room of her own where she might enjoy a few modest amenities: an unshared bathroom, a telephone by the bed, more family photographs on the walls. But such luxuries at The Home were reserved for those who could still manage by themselves. Mother's very helplessness, her low "self-care index," consigned her from the start to a section where the smell of disinfectant mixed noisomely with that of urine.

"Now don't you worry,' the Head Nurse told us with a smile that gave no warmth. "You *know* we'll take good care of your mom.'

The Director had his own way of handling our complaints: He complained right back. "You can't know what I'm up against," he'd say. "Everyone thinks they're special. Everyone wants a favor. Last night at dinner my wife asked me why I was smiling. Why shouldn't I have been smiling? She'd caught me thinking about my retirement."

In truth, as the strands of Mother's life attenuated—as she found it more and more difficult to walk, to speak, to think—her privacy ceased to matter so much, or so my brother and I must have decided. Somewhere along the line we fell into step with The Home's own fateful scenario: We gave up the struggle.

Now Mother will have to die in semiprivate surroundings, as so many of her roommates have died before her. Over the years newly-inked names have intermittently appeared on the wall outside the heavy bedroom door, signaling the presence of new occupants of the metal beds within.

Lorraine sits opposite me, on the other side of the bed, gently stroking Mother's veined hand. We are sweating out this vigil together, I the restless son, she the latest and most faithful of friends.

Everyone who works at The Home calls Mother by her first name, but Lorraine has earned the right. "Clara," she calls in a singing voice, "can you hear me, dear?" Did Mother blink just then, ever so slightly? Lorraine is certain of it. "You see?" she says to me. "Your mother can still hear us. She understands."

That has been Lorraine's assumption all along: If Mother could no longer speak, she could at least listen, and sometimes she could find ways to respond—by humming a tune, for instance, or by whistling. In recent months, with Lorraine's encouragement, Mother has done a lot of both.

Lorraine never gives up on anyone. "Your mother won't go," she assures me now, "until your brother gets here from Michigan. She's waiting to say goodbye to both her sons."

I am skeptical. My brother is due to arrive this very evening. "That's an interesting theory," I say politely.

Lorraine is a young artist who earns extra income as a part-time companion to residents of The Home. She and Mother have what the staff here calls "a special relationship." They fell in love at first sight. When Phil and I watched them together—when we heard Mother laugh as she let Lorraine brush the tangles out of her long, gray-black hair—we were sorry we hadn't found Lorraine sooner. In our helplessness we doted on the difference she made.

It wasn't that the staff had not been doing its job, only that the job itself was defined so mechanically, so bloodlessly. The nurses and their aides fussed and bustled. They kept Mother well-scrubbed, put clothes on her back, gave her medicine, spoon-fed her, wheeled her through the corridors by day and strapped her into bed each night. In the course of performing such chores they must have touched Mother with their hands hundreds of times, but rarely out of affection. Even the most well-oiled of institutions, alas, shares with the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* a fatal hollowness of spirit: It possesses everything but a heart.

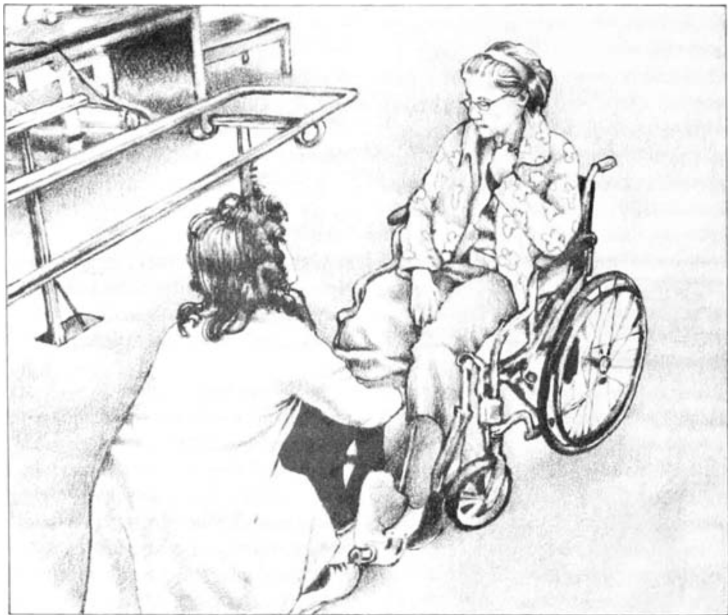
Parked in her wheelchair in a TV lounge or in one of those long, antiseptic hallways lined with donors' plaques, Mother must have felt terribly alone. Life of a sort buzzed all around her, but it was a life as indifferent to her own as was the constantly flickering television screen—The Home's eternal light—to which no one ever paid the slightest attention.

Sometimes when I look back at Mother's 52 months in The Home, I see her trapped in the eye of a storm, inside an institutional whirlwind composed equally of bureaucracy and bedlam. If children in a sandbox engage in what psychologists call "parallel play," then the aged in nursing homes engage in parallel pain. At The Home they seemed always in full cry, pounding their trays and shouting their torments while a staff clad in white went calmly about its business, dispensing pills, giving baths, mopping floors.

Out of all that commotion emerged ... nothing; nothing, that is, sufficiently real to engage Mother's feelings or to address her in ways she could comprehend and reciprocate. Where were the intimacies of yesteryear, where the connections of the heart?

There is a broader way of expressing this: Mother suffered from a type of emotional deprivation endured by nursing home residents everywhere. She was cared *for* but not, in most instances, cared *about*.

She fought back in her fashion, especially at first, when she had the strength. Against the institutional frost she posited the gentlest of thawing agents—her warm and elegant manners. With her walker clearing the way, Mother in a flowing housecoat could inch through Bedlam like some lame celestial hostess, conferring hospitality on sufferers and therapists alike.



Long after she had lost the greater part of her prodigious vocabulary, she retained a few useful phrases from the language she held dearest, the language of graciousness. *How nice to see you. Where have you been keeping yourself? Oh, perish the thought—it is I who should thank you.*

The rituals of civility that Mother never completely abandoned were more than a reflex; they were part of the emergency rampart she raised to make bearable a life that must have seemed beyond bearing. She would not lack for inventiveness, as I learned the very first time I telephoned her at The Home. (Incoming calls came through a pay phone in the hall, a few feet from the noisiest lounge.)

"I'm feeling much better, thank you," she informed me. "The doctor says I may be able to go home soon."

The next night I called and inquired again. "Well," she said, "the lake is beautiful and there's a nice clientele here, but the rooms are damp and the food is hardly up to... hardly up to..."

"Standards?" I suggested.

"Snuff," she replied.

The following night she seemed to be back in the hospital and feeling "a little under the weather." But a few days later she was apparently visiting her cousin Esther in Ohio. "Esther and I are sharing a room," she told me. "Esther snores."

"You mean Minnie?" I asked. Minnie was Mother's first roommate at The Home.

"Minnie who?"

Seldom did I have the heart to challenge Mother's fantasies. What good would it have done to insist that she was

not visiting Ohio, or not luxuriating at some sunny lakeside spa of her youth? Indeed, it seemed to me she had chosen to sojourn at places more pleasant than any Phil or I could provide for her.

To be sure, the psychologists and social workers at The Home took the opposite tack. Their treatment of residents was "reality-oriented," in accord with the latest gerontological theory. A blackboard in the lunch room got updated each morning to imbue elders with a sense of the here and now:

> You are living in THE HOME.
> Today is TUESDAY.
> The date is SEPTEMBER 5, 1981.
> The temperature outside is 56°

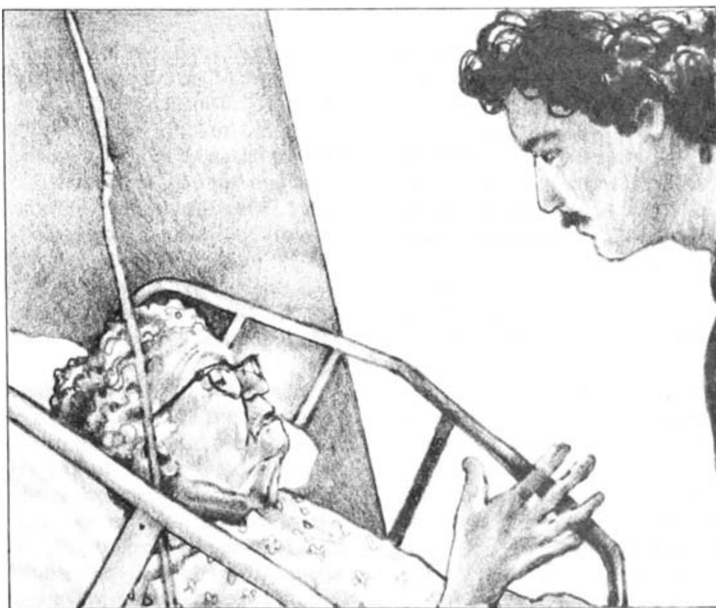
These were centripetal news items designed to keep residents from slipping off the mundane coil. But of what use was journalism when the news was always bad? For some like Mother, reality's strictures seemed far less appealing than imagination's privileges. As Dostoevsky's Underground Man observed, "the formula 'twice two make five' is not without its attractions."

PHIL AND I, meanwhile, entertained some fantasies of our own. Chief among them was our initial illusion that life at The Home need not be lived underground; that Mother, in this place, could stay connected to the quotidian world at large. Accordingly, we kept up her subscriptions to *Time* and the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*; we maintained her memberships in sundry organizations, both local and national; we even, in a moment of foolish hope, sent her a datebook.

My brother and I should have known better. We should have taken the hint from Mrs. Pollack, who supervised "housekeeping" at The Home, when she gently suggested that we buy Mother "some appropriate clothes"—shifts and robes rather than dresses, slippers rather than shoes. These were shut-in costumes, the raiment of people with no place to go.

Or, earlier still, we might have gotten the message from Banny Baer, an old family friend, after we told her that Mother was moving to The Home. "Damn!" Banny said, and that was all. The lone word assaulted our expectations. It seemed as peremptory, as final, as the slamming of a door. Yet we persisted in the charade; our wish was father to our fantasy.

Mother never did read the publications we sent her. Her reading skills had declined along with her memory. Once, as the two of us sat silently in her room, Mother pointed to a book I had written years before, a fable for children that I had dedicated to her. It had been one of the few things she'd brought with her to The Home, but now she seemed not to recognize it. "What is this?" she asked.



I picked up the book and began reading aloud. The story, about a fish's comic attempts to persuade a hungry bear not to eat it, instantly delighted Mother. She took the book from me. Now it was her turn to read aloud, haltingly, her index finger sliding from one word to the next. It had been a long time since I'd seen her so utterly engaged, and so enchanted.

The next morning I sought out a floor supervisor to tell her how much Mother had enjoyed the story. I suggested that other residents might also benefit, and I offered to donate some children's books to The Home. The supervisor was most polite. "I must think about that," she said. "As you know, creativity is included in our daily program."

But I do not wish to be unfair to The Home, which after all pursued its own peculiar vision of excellence. The staff, by and large, was cheerful and considerate (even if the philosophy often seemed obtuse and authoritarian), and the activities offered were as varied and entertaining as one could reasonably expect. Bingo, group singing, lectures, concerts and folk dances comprised the regular fare, plus bus trips for the ambulant and visits by volunteers to the bedridden.

The Home's facilities included a beauty shop on the first floor, a chapel off the lobby, and a physical therapy unit in the basement. At one time or another Mother partook of all those services and more. There was a period, in fact—perhaps spanning much of her second year there—when she seemed remarkably in tune with The Home's institutional rhythms. I could almost believe she was content.

Phil and I traveled to St. Paul as often as we could. It didn't seem to matter which one of us went there; the routine

seldom varied. We would take Mother to lunch at The Lex and then go for a long ride in Como Park or along the Mississippi River. Sometimes we would shop at her favorite stores in Highland Park, but never for very long. It wasn't just the walking that exhausted Mother, it was the people she kept running into, people who'd known her for years. Try as they might, they could not keep from staring at the plastic identification bracelet The Home had fastened around Mother's left wrist. It was a a strangely disconcerting symbol; the jewelry of someone outside the pale.

Still, those outings were glorious occasions. To Mother they must have seemed like holidays; certainly they did to us. She would have a cream sherry before lunch and a chocolate sundae for dessert. Our ride through Como Park might be topped off with Cokes at the Pavillion or even with more ice cream.

Going back, of course, was another story. "I don't want to go to that place," she would plead.

"I know, Mother, I know." But one afternoon the conversation took a surprising turn. We had parked as usual on the ambulance ramp in front of The Home. Through the front windshield Mother gazed wonderingly at the large brick building with its massive glass entranceway glinting in the sunset.

She turned toward me and touched my arm. "This is where I live, isn't it?" she said softly.

"Yes. This is your home."

It may have been the closest either of us ever came to glimpsing reality.

Our little excursions became more difficult as Mother's health deteriorated. The pain in her hip got worse, finally proving impervious to all the painkillers in The Home's capacious pharmacopeia. We were not surprised when a nurse telephoned my brother one morning in Ann Arbor and told him that Mother could no longer get around with a walker. "We've requisitioned a wheelchair," she said.

At that melancholy juncture, it seems to me in retrospect, The Home simply gave up on Mother. The doctor stopped prescribing physical therapy for her hip; the nurses stopped encouraging her to eat in the congregate dining room, preferring to bring trays to her room; and the aides stopped taking her to concerts and other events in the main hall. (By then Mother lacked both the strength to take herself and the words to ask for a push.) To an extent we only half-recognized at the time, Mother had become a part of the general bedlam, another shapeless body to be deposited each morning in the TV lounge.

Withal, Phil and I persisted in taking Mother out. We brought along a nurse's aide to help Mother get in and out of the wheelchair, though, and to assist with the food when Mother's hands became too shaky to wield a knife and fork.

One day in October, after a particularly trying lunch at the restaurant, the aide and I were unable to coax or carry Mother into the front seat of the car. Somehow she ended up in a heap on the leaf-strewn sidewalk, crying in panic and begging to be left alone. It took the generosity and muscle of three passers-by to rescure her.

THAT WAS MOTHER'S last outing. A few weeks later we found Lorraine.

"Tell me," Lorraine asks, "What was your mother like when you were a child? She must have been a beautiful woman." I try to remember for Lorraine's sake. I am her charge now, her target of mercy, no less than Mother.

But remembering is not easy. Is the old woman lying here really my mother, the same angel-empress who anointed me a prince? How is that possible? My head is dizzy with this grievous disjunction.

I must make an effort. I begin chronologically, as in an old-fashioned novel, the kind Mother used to enjoy reading. In the first place there were her parents—her merchant father, who died of diabetes when she was four, and her remarkable mother, who was part of our own family all those years and who became a third parent to Phil and me. In the second place there were Mother's public school days in Chillicothe, Ohio—where she was taught Latin, French, German, Spanish, and a smattering of Greek—and then her stint at Ohio State, which she cut short to marry Dad. In time there unfurled those sunny days in St. Paul, where we held forth as a rabbinical family—days the color of yellow grass or clean white snow, before our invincible father, while preparing the Sabbath sermon one morning, was inexplicably struck down.

As I speak the memories begin to flood my brain: the funny hats Mother wore; her handsome penmanship and the sepia ink she unaccountably favored; the way she felt my forehead for fever and held me when I had nightmares; the time I discovered her teenage diary and, against her wishes, read a few of the wonderfully frivolous entries (I was a teenager myself then); the secret, extra-succulent words we savored together: *hoopla, hosanna, lubricous, litotes*; how she looked that stricken time I had to tell her Dad was dead, and how Phil and I at the funeral tried to quell her wrenching sobs; her faith, which I could never emulate, and her singing, which no one in the congregation could ever match: "May the words of my mouth/ and the meditations of my soul/be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord...."

On and on I talk, for fear of drowning, while Lorraine just by listening keeps me afloat. And all the time I am drawing nearer, feeling closer, to the woman has brought us together and now lies between us. My Mother.

It turned out Lorraine was right as usual. My brother arrived at six o'clock, and less than two hours later Mother passed on, gently and without complaint. She was just two months short of being 82.

Incredibly, Mother had uttered a word, an affirmation, in our presence. "Clara," Lorraine had called, "do you know where you are going? It won't hurt, dear. It isn't at all painful."

And from the very edge Mother had whispered: "Yes."

It was not until days later that I realized Rebecca, the spectral roommate, was out of the room when Mother died. Perhaps a considerate nurse had found another bed for her. If so, I am grateful. In nursing homes as in all final refuges, no kindness can ever be taken for granted.