

What do you gain?

Jenny Radsma

What do you gain when you lose control? When I pondered this unusual question, my mother came to mind. For so much of her life, my mother fretted about matters the rest of us thought trivial and inconsequential. She visibly relaxed when a daughter arrived home after a flight or road trip. Stormy weather on a day she had committed to a task caused her no end of agitation, especially if others depended on her to drive. She worried about what the neighbours would think should one of us happen to raise our voices while conversing over coffee on the back patio. Daily headline news – wars, famines, politicians exchanging barbs, murders, assaults – all of it added to my mother's sense of insecurity. "Hé" she'd say, "always trouble stories." To avoid adding to her fears, my sisters and I offered selective information in up-beat, bite-sized pieces, doing our best to avoid mention of anything that might distress her.

But my mother, we learned, could also keep private anything she did not want her daughters to know. After my father died, and after she moved into a seniors' apartment, my sisters and I deduced from our respective conversations with Mom that she often slept on the love seat in her living room, whether for an afternoon nap or through the night. "Why, Mom? You have such long legs; you must be so uncomfortable." She evaded our questions and offered no explanation, annoyed with herself for having divulged too much, irritated by our intrusive probing and uninvited advice. Her daytime naps, we told her, interfered with her sleeping well through the night. Then she let slip that she didn't always undress to don her pajamas, that she slept frequently in her clothes. After a fire alarm went off in her apartment building in the middle of the night, thanks to an unwitting resident, something that happened more often than my sisters and I appreciated, my mother's seeming oddities took on a clear focus.

"I hate that sound," my mother said with unusual forcefulness about the shrill noise that pierced the usual quietude of the building. The alarm reawakened her dread of the air raid sirens that wailed impending danger during the Second World War. One of my sisters recognized Mom's terror from the fire alarm as symptomatic of post-traumatic stress. Because of her remembered fear, and not wanting to be caught unawares, especially in her night dress, our mother chose to

sleep fully clothed. In this way, should the alarm sound, she was at the ready to seek safety, decades ago from a bomb or a German attack, now prepared and dressed to walk down the stairwell, complete with wallet and purse in hand, to traipse down the stairwell with her neighbours, even to evacuate the building if necessary.

Surprisingly, my mother's dementia released her from the worries and cares that clung to her for so many years. In this photo, taken by my sister when Alzheimer's disease already held my mother in its clutches, her eyes are alight with love and laughter, delighted to be in her daughter's company, unconcerned about world strife, alarms, or the uncertainties of the future. She felt anchored and safe.



Jenny Radsma and her mother, 2006. From the author's personal collection.