

Memory is a Way of Forgetting

by Richard Lewis

We all loved aunt Bridget and marvelled at the way she managed to remain cheery in spite of the challenges life had thrown her way. She always seemed to focus on helping others rather than on her own considerable disability.

Having met Jim, an American GI during the war, she moved to the US where they raised a family. Ten years later Bridget developed Meniere's disease and after a botched operation, was condemned to silence, seriously impaired balance and frequent attacks of vertigo. Her shaky movements made her appear like one of those Chinese shadow puppets, as if the parts of her body were poorly connected and someone else was pulling the strings.

Her mother, my grandmother, had sailed over to live with them in the States to help out. It was only years later when aunt Bridget, uncle Jim and my grandmother returned to the UK, that I met her for the first time. I liked her right away, she was a quirky character who spoke loudly with an American drawl. She had an amazing ability to lip read, people often not realising at first that she was stone deaf.

Shopping with my aunt was always entertaining. When unhappy with the price of meat and vegetables at the market she would say to the store holder, "hey buddy, I'm not paying these prices, you'll need to buck your ideas up if you want my custom."

Though happy enough back in the UK she must have been conflicted, as she sorely missed her grown up children in the states. Initially, having her mother living with her had been a godsend, helping to bring up the children when she and uncle Jim were both working but as the years passed roles were reversed and she became carer to her mother.

At ninety, my grandmother who was now in the early stages of dementia, had become highly demanding. She had a walking stick she used to get attention, rapping on her bedroom floor to alert my aunt, who could feel the vibrations below. Uncle Jim could have done more to help but being Italian, seemed to think domestic matters were a woman's responsibility and rarely lifted a finger to help.

One day when visiting, the decorators had turned up to paint the outside of the house. My grandmother, dropping her knitting, pointed to the van outside saying, "what's that van doing there?" "It's the decorators gran," I replied. "Oh yes, of course," she nodded. Then not ten minutes later, her worn down face looking surprised, "what's that van doing outside?" "It's the decorators gran," I repeated. So it went on, the question about the offending vehicle returning like a boomerang. Then I thought, 'I know I'll turn the tables on her,' saying, "Gran, what's that van doing outside?" Looking confused, her tired eyes landed on me as she replied, "Well I've no idea."

Being a carer took its toll on aunt Bridget and after her mother died two years later, though she missed her dreadfully, it was also a relief. Sadly, not long after, uncle Jim developed lung cancer and quickly followed on. The double bereavement was too much for my aunt and she started going down-hill, giving up cooking for herself, neglecting her appearance and becoming convinced she couldn't afford to pay the bills, even though uncle Jim had left her well provided for.

It was heart breaking watching the slow decline. Family helped out as much as possible and we arranged for a home help to call in every day to give assistance but eventually, aunt Bridget like my grandmother and mother before, fell deeper into the welcoming arms of dementia. Her grip on reality slipping like a ship's mooring line unravelling, leaving her adrift on the tide. It soon became clear she would need to move into residential care.

Though difficult at first, once she'd adjusted to her new home with all her needs taken care of, living in a world of her own, she seemed perfectly happy. Rita regained her sense of humour and when people called would say, "I don't know where Jim is? He's never around when you want him," or "This place is far too big for us, I don't know why Jim bought it."

We never reminded aunt Bridget that uncle Jim was no longer with us, it would only distress her and there was no point as she wouldn't remember.

Sometimes memory is a way of forgetting.