

# Memory Care

By Susan Kleinman

“Someday...” Frank Sinatra’s voice greets Ernie as he pushes open the heavy glass door, “when I’m awfully low...”

Ernie can’t remember a single day, lately, that he *hasn’t* been low. At the law firm, where they passed him over for partner years ago, he’s stuck handling nuisance suits and go-nowhere cases. His daughter never calls or even texts him from college. And his wife? More and more, these days, she looks at him the way she looks at the faux-marble painting she’d gotten not-quite-right in the hall bathroom – a fixer-upper project gone awry.

*You know things are bad*, he thinks, as he crosses the plush carpeted lobby, *when the highlight of your week is visiting your mother in the nursing home*.

Well, it isn’t, technically, a nursing home. “The Windsor,” reads the gold script on the front door, “Elegant Assisted Living.” The air smells like cinnamon, and the curtains billow like ball gowns. The piped-in music – Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan – is carefully curated to give the impression that this is not a residence for the infirm and incoherent, but a swanky New York nightclub or a Caribbean cruise.

“Oh, but you’re lovely...” Sinatra croons over the loudspeakers, as Ernie waits for the elevator that will bring him up to the “memory care” floor, where his mother, Agnes, is losing her memory altogether.

Oh, but she *had* been lovely. Blonde and blue-eyed, with a figure so perfect that she had been a dressmaker’s model in Budapest before the Nazis came in. Ernie wonders, sometimes, whether his mother’s beauty was what had saved her at Auschwitz; if she had flirted with SS officers, maybe

even slept with them. Of course, that isn't the kind of thing you can ask your own mother, but he wouldn't think less of her if the answer is yes. When he was younger, he would have been horrified. But not now. Now he can only admire her.

*Just my luck*, he thinks, as the elevator doors open. *I finally stop hating her, and she's too far-gone to know.*

No, Ernie reminds himself, he hadn't *hated* his parents. He'd had... "issues," is what they call it at his Adult Children of Holocaust Survivors support group. He'd had *issues* with the Sesame-Street name his parents gave him after his grandfather, Erno, who had been gassed by the Nazis. He'd had *issues* about the way his parents had refused to let him play at any of the neighbor-kids' houses because this one's father had a German car in his driveway and that one's mother had German knives in her kitchen and another kid's parents looked like exactly the kind of people who would turn on you to save their own lives, if it ever came to that.

He'd had unresolved issues with the way his mother insisted on addressing an assembly of his entire school every year on Holocaust-Remembrance Day, terrifying his friends with her stories about selection lines and gas showers, and announcing to everyone – everyone! – that the reason Ernie had no brothers and sisters was because of the experiments the Nazis had done on her private parts. Some of the American-born mothers had signed a petition to ban Agnes's annual speech, but she had threatened to call the local Jewish newspaper and make a *shonda*, a scandal, and she had prevailed.

Sure, there had been a few other parents in the school who were survivors: the Duvidowicz' father; the Koenigsteins' mom. But they had the good sense to stay home on Holocaust Day, eating the grilled-cheese

sandwiches they learned to love as they strove to become Americans, while Ernie sat down to heavy dinners of beef goulash and chicken paprikash. To this day, the smell of paprika makes him gag.

It was probably no coincidence, someone at the support group once pointed out, that Ernie had married a third-generation American. Sandy's father's name is Richard, just like a movie star's. Her mother, Jane, went to Vassar College.

"Dick and Jane?!" Ernie had asked, unable to conceal his delight and his envy when Sandy told him that, on their first date. "Your parents' names are really Dick and Jane?!" He had barely been able to restrain himself from proposing on the spot.

His own parents hadn't been terribly happy about the engagement that came just a few months later. "I dun't understand these people," Agnes had shouted, when Ernie told her that Sandy's parents refused to serve *p'tchah*, calves-foot jelly, at the wedding. "Vhat kind of Jew doesn't like *p'tchah*?" After that, she made a point of serving *p'tchah* every time Sandy ("The Yankee Doodle," Agnes always called her) came to visit.

Ernie had issues with *p'tchah*.

But most of all, more than anything, he'd had issues with his parents' concentration-camp numbers. No, not just issues. He *hated* the tattoos. He hated the way Agnes and Jakob flaunted them, baring their forearms in short-sleeved shirts the minute the temperature climbed above 40 degrees. The way his father used the first four digits of his number as the burglar-alarm code at his stationery store, and his mother used her last four digits for the bank machine. The way they announced their numbers to the whole world with custom license plates on the big, boat-like Buicks that Jakob

insisted on parking right at the end of their driveway for all the neighbors to see.

“Why, Dad? Whyyyyy?” Ernie had pleaded when he father got the license plates. His friends’ parents’ cars were tagged with “GO-JETS1” and “LUV-10-IS”

“Vhy? Because fuck dem, dat is vhy” Jakob had shrieked – the only time Ernie ever heard his father curse.

Jakob has been dead for three years now, after a protracted battle with lung cancer. “In Europe, they didn’t let the Jews live,” he had grumbled when Agnes begged him to try one more kind of chemo. “In America, they don’t let us die.” When the rabbi came to the house to discuss funeral arrangements and asked, “Is there a family plot?” Agnes had stared him down, her gaze so steely that Ernie was sure he saw the rabbi’s hands tremble in fear. “Yes, Rabbi,” she had hissed, “it’s called *Europe*.”

The next day, as they stood on the windy, flat expanse of Beth Israel Cemetery, where the synagogue had a block of graves for members, Agnes looked around, agog, and Ernie realized that with all the relatives she had lost – her parents and siblings and uncles and cousins – she had never actually been to a cemetery. And he felt ashamed. Ashamed that it had taken him this long to understand that those school lunchroom speeches were what his mother had instead of funerals for her own parents; that the Buicks’ license plates were the only grave markers for his father’s family. Ashamed of the school plays he had never told his parents about and the class parties he’d not invited them to because he was embarrassed by their accents and their arms.

During the shiva, as Ernie stewed in a bitter broth of loss and guilt and remorse, he forced himself to ask his mother questions about the camps, about the Nazis, about the years right after the war.

“Now you ask?” she had sighed the first time, and he couldn't tell whether she was angry or just sad. But after a few moments' silence, she started talking. And then, every day that week, after the men from shul left with their *talleisim* and *teffilin*; before the ladies from the neighborhood came with their casseroles and cookies, she told him a little more. Mostly, of course, the stories were heartbreaking. But sometimes, to Ernie's surprise, Agnes's recollections made her laugh: tricks they had played on other inmates, jokes whispered late at night. And every time, after she finished a story, or got cut off in the middle by a well-meaning shiva visitor, Agnes would stick her arm out, so close to Ernie's face that the numbers blurred in his vision. “Alveys remember,” she said, in the accent that had embarrassed Ernie so much throughout his childhood. “Dun't ever forget.”

But then, she started forgetting.

At first, it was just little things: misplaced car keys, a neighbor's name she couldn't recall. When she complained about it to Ernie, he had chalked it up to normal absentmindedness: “Seriously, Ma, I can't walk into the next room of my house without wondering what I went in there for, either. And I'm just in my 50s!”

Soon, though, it was hard to explain away her forgetfulness. She couldn't remember her granddaughter's name; forgot a just-made dinner date for Ernie's birthday. And then, one afternoon, a woman from Agnes's neighborhood called Ernie to say she had found his mother down at the school bus stop, claiming she was waiting for her son to come home from

kindergarten. Agnes couldn't remember her own address, so the woman – Sherry, she said when she called – had brought Agnes back to her own home and asked questions until Ernie's name and number finally surfaced in the brackish pond that was his mother's mind, and Sherry had looked up his phone number.

“My own mom was in a really nice place,” she said when Ernie came to retrieve Agnes. She took a scrap of paper out of her purse and wrote “The Windsor,” with an address in Sycamore Hills. “They have a special floor for people with – well, call me if you have any questions, okay? It's a really....” Sherry's eyes teared up. “It's a really nice place.”

And it is nice: fresh vacuum tracks in the carpeting; museum posters of Pissarros on the walls. Tony Bennett sings “Fly Me to the Moon” through speakers mounted high in the corridors as Ernie key-cards himself into his mother's room.

“Hi, Ma,” he says, leaning over to kiss her head, which smells recently shampooed. Agnes startles – and then smiles. “Istvan! Is that you?” – Istvan, her youngest brother, shot in the back before the rest of the family was even pushed onto the train, because he had a limp from polio. But Agnes doesn't seem to remember the train or the pushing or the gunshot. She starts speaking in rapid Hungarian, which Ernie can barely understand because, as a child, he had stuck his fingers in his ears when his parents spoke anything but English. So now, he has to strain to mentally unconjugate verbs and untangle irregular tenses as his mother says something about a birthday party and a Dobos Torte and a game played with cherry pits.

As Agnes finishes her story, her eyes twinkle and her shoulders dance. But then, when she raises her hand to brush some of her wispy cotton-candy hair out of her eyes, she catches sight of the number on her now frail and wrinkled arm and starts to shriek, “What is that!?” in Hungarian, pointing in horror. “Who wrote on me? Who did this?”

“Easy, Ma,” Ernie says, laying a hand on her shoulder – partly to reassure her, partly to keep her from bolting out of her chair and screaming down the hall, the way the man next door did last Wednesday night when he mistook his own daughter for a robber. “Take it easy,” Ernie says, alarmed by this new degree of incoherence and agitation. “Shhh, it’s okay, Ma, I’m here.” But Agnes is rubbing furiously at the number, trying to use her index finger like an eraser, then spitting onto her thumb and trying to clean the ink off, the way she used to clean chocolate off Ernie’s face when he was a child.

He presses the call button and waits for a nurse’s aide to rush down the hall with an Ativan.

“Happened yesterday, too,” the aide says, as she lifts the pill and then the water up to Agnes’s lips. “Probably be time to move her, pretty soon.”

“Move her?” Ernie wasn’t aware that there was a floor here for patients even worse off.

“Nursing home,” the aide whispers. “You should probably call the director in the morning to make arrangements.”

Ernie’s eyes fill with tears he doesn’t bother hiding.

“Such a good son,” the aide says, crossing herself. “I’ll pray for you in church.”

*Might as well,* Ernie thinks. *God knows all my praying in shul isn’t doing anything.* But he says nothing, just stares out the window at the

Windsor's well-tended garden. And when Agnes finally nods off to sleep, he lifts her arm from her lap, gently strokes the patch she has rubbed herself red and raw, brings the number up to his lips and kisses it.

Back downstairs, he drives out of the parking lot and heads towards home. But as he slows at the turn to West Cloverdale, he recalls his mother's screaming voice – "Who did this? Who wrote on me?"

Tentatively at first and then more forcefully, he presses the accelerator and keeps going into Haverhill, makes a left onto Merriweather Road, and looks for the place he had passed a few months ago when he had to come to this neighborhood to depose a shop clerk in a slip-and-fall. There's a parking spot at a broken meter right in front – a good sign, he tells himself. He notices a seedy bar next door and wonders if he should stop in for a shot of scotch, or maybe tequila. But he isn't really a drinker: just some white zinfandel at Shabbos lunches; a little *l'chaim* at a bar mitzvah or a bris. And anyway, he is just here to take a look. Out of curiosity. That's all.

Inside, the place doesn't look or smell like he expected. What *had* he expected? The odor of stale urine, maybe? Gangbangers and cigarette smoke? But the only smell is Windex, and the only two other customers are rich-looking women a few years younger than him. One is carrying a brown purse with designer initials all over it: LV, LV, LV. The other is wearing nearly-transparent black exercise pants.

"How about an ice cream cone right on my boob?" the one with the purse says, flipping through a loose-leaf binder of designs. "That way, when I sag, it'll look like the ice cream is melting!"

Ernie wonders how the woman's husband will feel about that. He sneaks a sidelong glance at the women's hands and sees no wedding rings; wonders if this is some sort of post-divorce ritual for women, the way the divorced guys he knows – Mike Wasserman from shul; Jim O'Brian from the office – bought themselves motorcycles when their wives kicked them out, and grew ridiculous goatees that they tend like bonsai trees.

"Can I help you?" the man behind the counter asks.

"I believe those two women were here before me," Ernie says in the voice his bosses have deemed too quiet for a courtroom. *No rush to get home*, he thinks. Sandy probably won't even look up when he walks in the door. More and more, lately, she seems impatient with him – with his support-group meetings; with the seven tabs open on his computer at all times with articles about the Holocaust and pre-war Budapest. Last week, she taped to the fridge a little poster printed from the internet that says, "Don't look backward. You're not going that way." The fact that this is how she rebukes him, now – computer print-outs on kitchen appliances – hurts more than the message itself does.

No, Ernie thinks; Sandy won't care if he gets home late tonight.

"I believe these women were here first," he says again, pointing to the divorcees.

"That's okay," the one in the yoga pants says. "We're not in a rush. Our kids are with their dads." The women attempt a high-five, their palms so broadly missing each other that Ernie wonders how many tequila shots *they* had next door before they came in here.

"Yours?" the woman asks, and it takes Ernie a moment to realize that she's asking about his own kids, his custody status. "My daughter's at college," he mumbles, trying not to think about what Elana is doing right

this very minute out in Berkeley, where she has a *goyische* boyfriend she thinks he doesn't know about, and says nothing – nothing! – when her dorm-mates rally to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel, finishing the job for Hitler.

*Alveys remember.*

Will Elana remember?

“Help you?” The clerk asks again.

“Sorry, yes,” Ernie says. His voice quivers like a bar mitzvah boy's. “I'm ready.” And then, forcing himself to stand up straighter, “Do you do custom work?”

The guy nods. “Sure. All the time.”

“Numbers?”

“Like, you mean, a birthdate? Anniversary? Yeah, sure. Whatever you want.”

Ernie shakes his head “no,” takes the pen and tiny pad he always keeps in his shirt pocket and jots down the digits he knows better than his own Social Security number, better than his birthday or his phone number: A-2-3-9.... He rolls up his sleeve and points to his forearm. “Right here.”

The guy lets out a long, slow whistle. “Shit, man,” he says, finally. “I mean, shit, man. Wow.”

“You know what it is?” Ernie is surprised. The guy doesn't look like someone who sits around reading Primo Levi.

“Yeah, we had a neighbor when I was a kid, Mr. Sublansky. Jeez. I wonder whatever happened to him. But, um, I thought you people aren't supposed to... I thought it was against your laws.”

*It is and it isn't*, Ernie wants to explain to him, but doesn't. Some sages believed that the prohibition in Leviticus was actually just against

tattoos to memorialize the dead – and his mother isn't dead. Not yet. No, his mother is two towns over, in an Elegant Assisted Living Facility, sleeping a drugged sleep in her immaculate room, dreaming of God-only-knows what horrors that will be lost to her again in the morning light. But he just says, "It's okay."

The guy – "My name's Joe, by the way," – motions Ernie into a small room closed off by a curtain on a ceiling track, and Ernie follows him. He remembers curtains just like this one in his father's hospital rooms. Every time he had pulled the fabric back, ball bearings click-click-clicking in their track, he expected to see the robust Jakob of his childhood – "Fuck dem!" – and was shocked, each time, all over again, to see a frail old man, his cheeks sunken and stubbled; his arm so withered and wrinkled that his number was hidden in papery folds of dying skin.

"You sure?" Joe asks one last time, as he snaps on latex gloves and hovers a finger above an electric contraption studded with needles.

Ernie nods, and the needles jump to life.

END

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