

Broken Windows

“Take off your shoe.” Her eyes were wide with panic. “Take off your shoe and throw it.”

“What? Why?” I put my coat on the chair. I’d just kissed my dad goodbye as he left for church.

“Take off your shoe, and throw it through the window.” Mom’s frail arm jerked forward, as if throwing something. “We have to get out of here.”

“No, we don’t. We’re fine.” I moved a pillow on the couch, and sat beside her.

Mom bent over. She fingered my shoestrings. “Take it off and throw it.”

I took her hand from my shoe, and held it. All bones, with blue veins visible through translucent skin. And cold. “It’s ok. I’m here.”

She looked at me like I’d betrayed her. She knew I wouldn’t help her break the window, and escape.

I tried to warm her hand. So cold. “Do you want to watch T.V.? Are you hungry?”

She trembled. Her eyebrows knotted together.

“Mom?”

“Help!” She screamed. “Help!”

The red numbers on the cable box glowed. 10:35. Dad had gone to 11:00 Mass, and wouldn’t be back until 12:30 -- or later, if he stopped at the store on the way home. I screamed with her.

We denied the dementia at first. When Mom forgot things, stood in front of the sink and couldn’t turn on the faucet, or used strange words, we ignored it. I

remember telling her that my daughter got accepted to a prestigious college, and she said, "When she gets her first alligator, she will have made it."

"First alligator?" I repeated, and laughed.

And there were times when she was upset and worried, and I still found humor in it: "Where's Al?" she pleaded. "Where is he? I need him." I assured her that he would be back soon, and asked if I could help, but she insisted she needed my dad. "I want Al. I want Al. I need a Reese's cup."

I got her a Reese's cup, and one for myself too. We shared a sweet moment, one of many, because even amid the pain of losing the wonderful mother I'd always loved, there were moments of joy. She told me stories of her childhood, of the war years, and of meeting my dad. And one afternoon, I happened to read a headline aloud about the Pope's visit to U.S. She got the idea we were going to see Pope Francis. The whole afternoon she was excited. I turned on the T.V. to show her that he was not in Cincinnati, but when she saw the popemobile on the screen, she squeezed my hand and thanked me for getting the tickets.

"You're welcome," I said, and shared her happiness. It was a lovely escape, and I didn't need to take off my shoes, or break any windows.