

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
Honor Thy Mother and Father - A Daughter's Calling
by Judith Ingram

Life's challenges just kept on coming. It was 2010 when Danielle and I both moved into our own place. Going into a senior mobile home park was a hard and self-disappointing decision. I had always told myself I would never end up in an old folk's park, and yet, at that time I had little choice. I couldn't go on renting any longer. I needed something I owned, and I had little funds to buy anything else. I discovered, however, that the park was a pleasant, quiet and safe place for me, and I came to accept my surroundings with appreciation.

It was a fairly large home with over eighteen hundred sq.ft. with a nice landscaped yard and a carport with a small storage shed. My little Lillie May just loved it, especially after having lived six months basically in an upstairs bedroom. With her short little legs, she had a difficult time trying to go up and down the stairs, which meant I carried her most of the time. The leased home my daughter, grandson and I all lived in had a very small yard, and nowhere for Lillie to play. She was rather depressed there and showed much joy in our new surroundings. Lots of room to run and roam.

Life in the park were years of quietness for me as the days and months quickly passed. Most of those years were taking care of my grandson, which I had been doing since first returning to Oregon. My daughter continued to attend college and went on to Oregon University. After helping raise him for about six years, I came to be thankful I had three girls. I had wanted a boy so badly when I was younger, and felt disappointed I never gave birth to one, but after seeing the difference between boys and girls, I was actually glad. That little boy scared the heck out me with his bravery and daring acts. Many times I feared he would break his neck, or an arm or leg the way he played so hard. It was a good experience for me.

I suppose the one memory that stands out the most during that time is I finally met my business partner and a dear friend, who became my soul-sister. PJ (Pamela Johnson) and I worked together for ten years building our website business with our only contact being over the phone and through emails, until the day she came to visit me. I was so excited the day I drove to Eugene to pick her up at the airport, and when we first met face to face, it was like I had known her all my life. She spent a week with me. We had so much fun every day doing all kinds of activities. A day driving all over the countryside to photograph old barns and rivers. A day shopping, getting our hair done, having a wonderful lunch. A day hanging out talking about our past, and discovering how much we had in common. I treasure that time with all my heart as it was a couple years later when she was came down with ALS. That was the saddest news I had ever received, and watching her life slowly deteriorate was a painful reality.

I took a trip to California about a couple of years later and stayed with her for several days. She wasn't too far gone yet and we had a nice time visiting, shopping, and eating out. It was apparent how difficult it was getting for her to walk as her legs were giving out. She had already lost much control of one arm ... but, her spirits were high. She seemed happy and was determined not let it take her joy in life away. She was strong and brave, not so much for herself but for her

family. Over time, our phone conversations became less and less as she lost the ability to speak. I felt so helpless being so far away.

In 2014 Lillie became ill and after ten years since the day I looked into her eyes and fell in love, I had to put her down. She was the love of my life, and upon her passing I became extremely depressed. The day I took her to the veterinary, I first went to McDonald's and got her a hamburger. She just loved to eat and I wanted it to be a special day for her. I went to the park where we sat while she devoured her treat. When got to the veterinary office it was my plan to hold Lillie in my arms while the doctor injected her so she would pass in my loving embrace, but he said she needed to be on the exam table so his assistant could hold her still. I stood by her side, petting her, telling her it was ok, and that I loved her. I thought it would be a quick and painless passing, yet, that isn't what happened. The doctor jabbed the needle into her leg and missed the vein. Lillie jerked and scream, her eyes filled with fear. The doctor jabbed her again and within seconds she was gone.

When they left the room I stood beside her, holding her limp lifeless body until it was cold. I drove home feeling empty inside. I cried for days, curling up in her doggie bed and smelling her blankets. Before I had taken her in, I wanted to save one special toy of hers, so I let her pick out which one. I would set one toy after another in front of her, asking which one she wanted me to keep. She would look at each toy and turn her head, until I placed a little teddy bear next to her and she leaned toward it, rubbing her nose against it. I knew that was the one she wanted, and that is the one I have kept close to me all these years.

I know it might sound strange, the things I did after her passing, but for the first time in my life I fully and compassionately understood how deep love can go for an animal. Until then, I never could relate to when someone told me they lost their pet, as if it were their own child. I could relate to their sorrow, because I knew sorrow, yet, not to that depth of love. I've had countless animals in my life with many cats and dogs, various birds, fish and guinea pigs, as well as a variety of farm animals ... and I loved them all, just not to the depth that I loved my Lillie girl. She showed me that part of life, and ever since I have not been able to get another dog. Lillie was my soulmate animal in this life, and frankly, her loss is something I don't want to feel that kind of pain ever again.

When I realized how far lost I had become without her, I knew I was in a deep state of depression, and I had to pull myself out of that darkness. A few months later I decided to take Danielle and my grandson on a trip to Arizona to see my other daughter Karey. The trip made a world of difference for me. Being with my family, seeing my grandchildren helped me regain life again. When I got back home, I was able to move on. She will always hold a special place in my heart ... but in all honesty, I still have some of her toys and her doggie bed and blanket packed away. Some things are not easy to let go of.

A year later after her passing, my job with the Maui real estate company came to end, and after twelve years I found myself, once again, having to make some big decision. My life felt totally uprooted. It came as a shock, as Rosie led me to belief that the transition of their business to a new franchise venture included me. But I had a feeling as I watched things slowly step away

from my services, and saw the perks the new company offered was everything I did. When all was complete on their end, I got the call that my services were no longer needed. The call was brief and to the point. I should have trusted my intuition, but I trusted her to the very end, and that left me in a bad financial way. I was stunned and hurt, and greatly disappointed.

My priority at that point was to get enough funds to live on until a steady income was coming in. I decided to sell my manufactured home and move out of the park. The cash sale provided enough for me put down several months' rent on a studio apartment, where I planned on temporarily landing. It wasn't an ideal living situation, but it was cheap. I really didn't expect to live there long, yet, as it turned out, I was stuck there one and half years before I escaped that place.

The surroundings were partly secluded and was located above a large shop. The owners lived on the property raising about a dozen adopted kids of all ages. The shop below was not in use, most of the time, and there was one small empty room where they let me store the things that I had no room for in the studio unit.

Once I got settled in, I started looking for a job. I was hired at the Best Western motel as a front desk clerk, after my first interview. While in training, I discovered that it wasn't the ideal job but I was willing to make the best of it, even though the office manager didn't take a liking to me at all. The owner said she wanted one of her family members to get it. The intimidation was uncomfortable, and soon after, I was let go. The manager simply called and left a voice message, she said I wasn't a good fit. I was relieved. When I saw an ad for a part-time reception position, I immediately responded by email asking if the position was still available. I got a response back that the position had been filled. When I saw the name of the person who emailed me back, I realized he was my old broker from All State Real Estate from years past. Until then, I didn't know the position was for a real estate office. He wouldn't have known who I was since my last name had changed after I remarried. I wrote him back to let him know it was me, and give him a big hello, long time no see, and asked him to keep me in mind if things don't work out. Immediately, I received a phone call from someone else I used to work with ... the daughter of the Century 21 company I had worked at as well. Her and I ran the office together for a while way back in the day. She was now the office manager of RE/MAX. The joy in her voice was overwhelming to hear from me, and asked me to come in for a chat, telling me they hadn't processed the paperwork on the new hire yet.

When I arrived, the three of us went into the conference room and had a great visit. Needless to say, I was hired instantly. It was only a weekend job, which was perfect really. I wasn't looking to reboot my career, only supplement my social security, which I had just filed for at age sixty-two. To my surprise, there were many agents I had either worked with or new from my past days in the business who were all working in this one RE/MAX office. It was great seeing them all again, and they were excited to have me. After nearly twenty-five years in the business, at that time in 2015, I knew then I could not escape real estate, though I tried a few times. It's just where I belonged. But it was more than real estate. They had a property management division that gave me a whole new experience.

I truly loved my job there, though the winters were a great challenge with snow packs and iced roads and freezing temps. The fifteen-mile drive wasn't too fun at times, but it was mostly freeway. There surely were some days that were quite challenging, but I got there every weekend, on time every time. In the five years I worked there, I only missed three days of work ... for my two granddaughter's weddings held in Portland.

I'm kinda proud to say that I had the best attendance record the company had ever had ... though there were many times I had to force myself out that door. And, there were days I probably should have stayed home for safety concerns. But that wasn't me. Dependability has always been my priority.

Over time, as time dragged on, a year later I had become desperate to get out of that studio. There were many factors involved that were driving me to seek for a way to escape. When I first moved in, it was summer and, on some days, it was scorching hot. The old smelly window air conditioner hardly did a thing to keep the place cool. With no screens on the windows, I didn't open them, due to the flies and bees buzzing around ... I survived with fans and a water bottle mist. The metal building had no insulation, with an opened beam high ceiling full of daddy long leg spider webs I never could reach to clean. Although I managed to keep the spiders from making webs within my reach, using a ladder and broom. That winter I painfully discovered the heat system was so terrible that I had two radiator heaters running in the main living area, hardly keeping it warm, and paying over three-hundred-dollars a month on my electric bill. There were nights I lied in bed, bundled up in an electric blanket and shivering. There were nights I would cry I was so cold. Taking a shower was most terrible, even though I had a smaller third electric heater in the bathroom as there was little room for a larger one. It was awful being stuck there and all I could do was hang on until Spring.

When the weather began to warm up, all the kids came out screaming all day, fighting and crying and playing, into dusk. The noise pierced through the walls, ruining the peaceful surroundings. But there was a pond down below with geese, and they were fun to watch from the two-story kitchen window, especially when they had goslings. The male goose would stand guard, constantly looking around for danger while the mama tended to leading them to find food. Then, one by one, the babies started to disappear. The owner said they get eaten every year. That made me sad after I watched the male goose being so protective of them. And to top it all off, across the road was a railroad track, and although it was quite loud blowing its horn as it passed by every day, it was often interesting to observe the graffiti art that laced the train cars.

Surviving with only a few of my personal belongings, again, put my frame of mind back to where I had been before ... with a feeling of half living. When a water pipe broke down in the shop and flooded the room where all my things were, that was my breaking point. It was a horrible thing seeing all my boxes and furniture soaking wet. I couldn't get anyone to help me, other than the owner's oldest son who shut the water off, and did remove some of the heavier items outside. After I haul everything out, I rented a machine to suck up as much water as I could. Many things were ruined.

Since I had to leave everything outside for days to dry, as well as the room itself, I also worried my things could be taken – which thankfully nothing had been. I was relieved, however, that this happened in late Spring during the warmer season, though all the same, at this point, I hated it there all the more. But I didn't have enough money to go anywhere else, and it was the first time I was nearly broke, living pay day to pay day.

Having the week days free, when I got everything dried and stored back into the storage room, I decided to take a trip to California to visit my mom and stepdad. It had been years since I'd seen them, and our recent phone conversations gave me a sense that they weren't in too good of shape. Upon arrival, I was shocked at the condition they were living in. They were still in the senior mobile home park where my brother Johnny used to live, and had been there for over forty years. It was a small one bedroom, one bath double wide trailer and the place was jam packed with so much stuff and clutter that there was only a narrow pathway through the living room and kitchen area to the back bedroom and bath. It didn't appear the place had been cleaned in years.

I discovered my eighty-nine-year-old stepdad was molded to his decade old worn-out recliner where he sat all day watching the 24-inch screen TV about five feet from his chair while dosing off and on, sleeping there all night too, every night, I discovered. He only got up to either use the bathroom or sit at the kitchen table to eat whatever my mother was able to prepare. It appeared he hadn't bathed in months, which saddened me because in his healthier days, he showered every day at the gym after riding his bike at least five miles. Sam had always been an active person, hiking mountains and trail riding. Most of their marriage was spent working and traveling, and a lot of camping and cruise ship adventures. How those days were long gone.

My eighty-four-year-old mother on the other hand was fixated to her desk chair in front of her computer where she spent most all of her time. For years she had been writing a book on how to correctly interpret the Bible after she fell into a theory from an author she found on online. She bought all his series of books and poured over them, claiming he was the re-incarnation of biblical prophets, claiming his words were God inspired. She told me people don't understand the Bible because it's written in code, and she had the secret code. She also believed the world was coming to an end and started getting rid of a lot of her personal belongings, which fortunately my brother Rusty was able to grab up some of our family heirlooms. It was quite obvious that she too hadn't bathed in a long while herself as her body odor revealed most undeniably.

It was apparent that she was living in a different reality and my stepdad, Sam, was nearly neglected. My assumption was that she was too consumed in her own world, with her beliefs having been drastically altered. She placed no value on the physical body, and therefore had no need to bath. When I said to her that cleanliness is Godliness, her response was that it actually meant spiritually. That's when I learned that she didn't like water, either drinking it or touching it only when she had to. This indicated to me why she hadn't helped Sam bathe, or why she didn't seek some in-home caregiving to help him. I was very disturbed to learn they had been paying for years on a long-term health plan putting out hundreds of dollars a month and never opened a claim. They both could have qualified for in-home caregiving at no cost, but she didn't ever

activate it. And frankly, they both looked like they were on death's bed, and in need of something to be done.

The entire trip left me sad. The beautiful backyard my stepdad took great care of, with grapevines he planted overflowing the arbor he built, the waterfall koi fish pond and covered picnic BBQ area surrounded by flower plants and shrubs were all dead. It felt like a graveyard, when once it was thriving with life. When I got home, I got to thinking of how I could help them, that would also help me. The thought of leaving them in that condition didn't set right with me, so a couple of weeks later I called my mom and asked her if they would like to come live in Oregon where I could take care of them. She said she would be open to the idea, but she didn't think Sam would be willing to leave. He had spent most of his life in that town Manteca, where he once had lots of friends and some family ... though most were deceased by then.

At first, when she said she would be willing to move to Oregon, she thought it best to wait until Sam had passed. That's when we began to talk about buying a house together, where she would make the down payment and their income with mine would then show the income level for loan requirement. When I asked about the downpayment, she was worried that it would wipe out their savings. I explained to her that when she sells their mobile home, we could use that to replace her savings account, but she didn't think the trailer was worth near the amount we would need... and, truthfully, it really wasn't, but just like I had once told my brother Johnny, "Have faith," I knew we could put this together and keep her financially secure.

Immediately I began looking for a house to accommodate us both, but a few weeks later she told me that Sam had agreed to the move, and she had changed her mind, saying it would be good for me to take care of them both. She realized she couldn't take care of Sam any longer, and that changed things considerably. I had to adjust my focus to find an affordable home for the three of us.

The nice thing was, since I was working at a real estate office, I had the advantage to do my own searches. However, I needed a realtor to do the showings, and my daughter Danielle had her license by then, becoming my real estate agent. Danielle had gone into real estate after she finished all her college and university courses, and after she figured she could make more money doing that, instead of an hourly wage job. At that time, while I was working at RE/MAX, she was working for Century 21. Every day I searched MLS trying to find the perfect home, and every day properties were being snatched up so quick before I could even preview them. Offers were being made within hours of hitting the market ... and sometimes going into MLS already in Pending status. It was getting frustrating and concerning that I would find us a home. I had made four offers and was beat out every time. People were making offers way over asking price just to get a house.

Finally, I had to lower my expectations and be more creative. When I saw a house that was only two bedrooms with one and half baths, but had a large, well-built 12x12 foot shed in the backyard, I had to make a big decision. I had to alter my thinking for my own future. The home was very nice, but very small ... perfect for one or two people, and I knew it would be perfect for me when they both passed. It also had one of the most beautiful landscaped yards I had seen. It

looked like something out of a home and garden magazine ... and that was what I fell in love with the most. I was thrilled when my full price offer was accepted. I knew it would take thousands of dollars to remodel the shed into a living space, and my mother agreed to pay for it. I hired a contractor who tore out all the build-in shelving, installed a sliding glass door on one side, and a door with a window on the other side. I had an air conditioner installed and a small window on another side. He insulated it, sheet rocked it, installed carpet and pad, while digging a ditch to install an electrical line. The only thing missing was a bathroom or running water, which I could do without. It just meant depending on the house for those needs.

As soon as my offer was accepted, I told my mom I was going to wait until my room was finished and the house was set up before putting their trailer on the market. I already knew she would be taking the master bedroom with half bath, and Sam would go into the second bedroom. I also knew I wasn't going to bring most of their old, run down furniture ... it was going to the dump. So, I went on a shopping spree with my credit card in hand.

I got Sam a nice power lift-chair for his bedroom, along with matching recliners for the living room. I knew with his difficulty getting up, and needing a hand, the lift-chair would be perfect at night, as he had to get up several times to use the bathroom ... but I also knew he couldn't sleep in a lying down position with his sleep apnea. Mom said he was supposed to use a CPAP machine but he refused. Sleeping in a more upright position seem to work fine for him. Mom was excited that she was getting a new bed, telling me how lumpy her mattress was ... my guess it was decades old.

Since I didn't have a TV, nor had one since 2002, I got Sam a large screen television. With the TV as the only thing he had in life, I thought it important to give him that viewing pleasure, especially since watching sports was his greatest joy ... although he was a huge baseball fan, he enjoyed all sports. My mom had her own antique desk and dresser that she brought, as well as another antique dresser for Sam. I kept my loveseat and some small tables and book shelves. The only thing missing was a kitchen table, which I figured we could pick out when they got here.

Mom told me to go ahead and unpack what items I wanted to put out, so I filled the house with my personal belongings and hung pictures on the walls. It felt good to finally unpack much of what had been stored, and for over two months I lived in the house, dreaming that someday it would be all mine, knowing too it would be a dream of theirs to have such a nice, clean home, and far away from California. They had come to Oregon to see me many times over the decades and always loved it here.

When the day came that my newly remodeled room was ready, it was time to contact a realtor in my folk's area to list their place. I told the realtor to list it for eighteen thousand because it took fifteen thousand for the downpayment and closing costs, and to cover the realtor's commission and moving expenses. When the realtor went to my folks place to get the listing, she called me to say she didn't think it would sell for nearly that, trying to get me to lower the price to seven thousand. I told her to list it at that price anyway, knowing that's how much I needed to replace in their savings account. A couple of weeks later a full price offer came in, just as I believed it would, and I told my mom to start packing. That's when things really took off.

Then the day came when I rented a UHaul truck and was on my way to California. A close friend offered to drive me down and help with the transition. He had agreed to give me three days so it wasn't a rushed deal, but on the way, he told me something had come up and he had to be back sooner than he thought. That put a huge stress on the situation. It also ruined my plan to stop in Sacramento to spend time with my soul sister PJ. Her ALS was in its final stages. Basically, she was on her death bed after suffering years in pain both mentally and physically. The rapid decline was overwhelmingly sad. I wanted to spend more time with her but when we arrived, I got us lost trying to find her house. It was over an hour driving around in the UHaul truck trying to find her place. I knew PJ couldn't talk so I hoped whoever was there caring for her could help me find my way, and so I finally called but the caregiver lady didn't speak good English. Finally, we were able to get there, but by then it was getting dark. My friend dropped me off while he went to park the truck and hang out for a while.

After an hour or so sitting by PJ's side holding her hand, trying to make conversation watching her struggle to communicate, my friend called my cell and said he was out front and ready to go. When I saw the disappointment in her eyes that I was leaving so soon, I felt awful. When I hugged her goodbye, I knew that was going to be the last time I ever saw her, and it was. It was hard to hold the tears back while trying to be strong for her, but my eyes watered all the same. She could see how much I loved her and that, I suppose, was all that mattered the most.

When we took off, somehow we turned down into a cul-de-sac, and with it being dark out and him having only one eye, the truck was too big for a full turn around. As he backed up, he drove over the curb into someone's front yard and when I felt a big jolt, I jumped out to see what it was, and saw he had hit their tree. I quickly jumped back in the truck and told him to gas it. We got the heck out of there fast!

By the time we reached our motel we were both tired and irritable and after we got something to eat, we both crashed. It wasn't the first time we had traveled together, sharing a motel room with two queen beds. We'd been friends and co-workers for decades. He'd helped me out many times, but this time was by far the most challenging. I had let my mom know we made it and would be over in the morning. She informed me she had hired a young couple to assist in loading the truck, which I was very happy about. When we arrived, I was stunned that she hadn't packed much, and although I had brought a stack of flattened boxes, it wasn't enough. My friend went to find more while I continued to sort through and pack things while the couple continued to load the truck. It was starting to get late when I realized that we needed more help, so I called my former sister-in-law. She came right over. The young couple had to leave around six o'clock but my mom and I and my friend and former sister-in-law all worked until midnight, having to leave what we could not get done. I felt bad that we left a total mess with the front porch loaded with furniture and junk, which my mom said the Goodwill was going to pick up. But inside, it was filthy with more junk sprawled around. We all were so exhausted and ready to collapse at that point that there was no time or energy left to even clean the place. A week later I got a call from the realtor telling me the buyers were very upset because Goodwill did not come, and so they wanted my mom to pay a hundred dollars to clean the place up, which I was happy to send them.

I had booked another room at the motel for that night for mom and Sam, and we parked the UHaul truck in safe place, with a lock. The next morning, we went to breakfast and were on our way back to Oregon. My friend drove the truck with Sam's company, and I drove their car with mom's company. When we got to Grants Pass, we got separated when my friend, who was behind me took an exit off the freeway. It was dark by then so I turned off on the next exit and called him. He said Sam had to use the bathroom. I told him I was going ahead and will meet them at the house. When we got to the house, before they arrived, I took mom inside. When she first saw it, she was in awe. Everything was clean and organized and she was afraid of touching anything. When my friend arrived, he helped Sam into the house and said he had to go and would bring the truck back in the morning with a crew to help unload it.

We were all so tired that I got them ready for bed and headed to my room. The next morning Sam was up and sitting in the living room. He was upset that the TV wasn't working, and I explained to him that Directv wouldn't be out to hook it up for a few days. Mom said I had to do something because he had to have his TV, so I hooked up ROKU to give him something to watch. I also was able to get him into the shower, and he was so happy about that. When I got him out the first time, with a towel wrapped around him, he looked me straight in the eyes, and with his shaky voice and piercing stare, he said, "Thank you." It was an emotional moment to see how joyful he was to be clean. He said it felt like a hundred pounds of weight had been lifted.

Eventually, he was able to take his own showers. In time, he had renewed life. Every day he got better and better, and he loved my cooking, eating better than he had in a very long time. My mother on the other hand was totally the opposite. For days, weeks, months I tried to get her to bathe. She refused to the point we would argue about it. After nearly three months I told her she stunk so bad it was making me ill. She said she didn't smell anything. I said pigs don't smell their shit either. Finally, she agreed to take a bath but refused a shower telling me she hadn't had one before and didn't know how to. At their mobile home they only had a bathtub with a cheap rubber shower hose attached to the faucet, which I assumed was for Sam. I finally managed to get her into the tub, but it would be several weeks later before I was able to get her bathed again, after more arguments, and this went on for a long time. If I even mentioned it was time to bathe, she would try to get out of it. I could not understand why anyone wouldn't want to bathe, but she seemed perfectly content. I noticed it was the same with washing her hands. I had to continually ask her to wash her hands after using the bathroom, before meals, and after being out shopping.

But bathing wasn't our only issue. She seemed quite jealous that Sam was getting such good treatment, and made remarks that I was spoiling him. At dinner, when Sam first made comments that the meal was good, she would snap, "Better than mine?" She had made a point that she wanted me to make dinner every night, a full course meal, which every night I did, even on days I worked and didn't get home until nearly five o'clock. When I would serve dinner, she made remarks like, "Look Sam, Judy's our waitress," or "This is like eating at a restaurant," whereas I would respond informing her that is what caregivers do. After mom's repeated comments on Sam's compliments, he quit speaking altogether as he saw how it affected her. My mother never really liked to cook, and especially never liked having to clean up the mess afterwards. From early on in my life I realized she wasn't the domestic type. I completely knew why Sam

commented on my meals, and why they had eaten out a lot at fast food places. As a child I remember the many times my dad complained, sometimes most horrendously criticizing her cooking, but Sam was too kind of man to ever say a word.

Sam was a grateful man and it showed in his appreciation of everything I did for him, but he saw how it affected my mom, hurting her feelings. At first, when she would question his compliments on my cooking, he would say, "Both good." Then, as time went on, however, she seemed to become envious that Sam was getting such good care, calling it 'being spoiled.' I really think she felt guilty for her own lack of his care. It became obvious to me that she paid little attention to his needs as she was so engrossed into the world she mentally created. Although her physical condition was better than Sam's, her mental state seemed in decline. I began to suspect that she had dementia, especially when several times coming home from work, I found the gas stove on with empty content that ruined a few of my stainless steel pans I had kept in great condition for fifty years. Needless to say, I was very upset about that and I banned her from using the stove.

Many times, upon arriving home I found Sam sitting in his chair sweating because my mom never turned on the AC and it would be extremely hot inside the house, while she was in her room wrapped in a robe, and yet, never noticed. I became so worried that she would catch the house on fire, and so concerned about Sam's neglect that I quit my job so I could stay home and manage the situation. Everyone was disappointed that I left, but I did spend a couple of weeks training the new girl.

Sam had turned ninety years old just two months after they arrived. The first thing I did upon their arrival was make them both doctor appointments for a full checkup. Sam had been diagnosed with Parkinson many years earlier, as well as prostate cancer, and had suffered with extreme constipation for years. Because of his lack of bathing, under the roll of fat on his breast, he had a massive yeast infection that was raw and bloody, yet, he never complained, but was very thankful when I took action to help heal it. He had a morning routine he went through each day where he would get up change from his pajamas and get dressed, put on his socks and shoes, and head for his living room recliner to watch TV. About once or twice a week he would take a shower first. He continued to have a really good appetite, and though he stopped complimenting me, it was obvious how much he enjoyed my meals.

Once a week my mom would get him up and drive to Costco to do their walking exercise, which they had been doing for years. In the process they would come home with bags and bags of groceries. She bought several large plastic containers and began to load them up with food and seal the lids. I would carry them to the garage for storage. She was very keen to the belief that hard times were coming and we needed to stock up on supplies. Not only food, but batteries, and lots of insect repellent, as well as gas masks and survival stuff like that. I discovered in the move that she had already bought several boxes of 50-year survival food. The boxes had never been opened since she purchased them a decade ago. I finally opened the boxes to see what was inside and found five-gallon buckets sealed airtight with freeze dried meals of all sorts. There was no way to convince her she had gone overboard, which I was fully aware of when I saw the bags of insect sprays, fly and ant traps, and countless packages of hand warmers while packing their

things. The few hundred dollars' worth of batteries she had stocked up on had all gone bad and it was crushing when I had to toss them all in the garage after finding them leaking. All of this revealed to me the state of mind she had been living in for years, which was a bit disturbing to me.

Sam was easy to take care of, he just didn't communicate much and he let me make all the decisions for his wellbeing without any resistance ... unlike my mother. She, on the other hand, was a different story, being annoyingly opinionated. Although she stayed silent in her room most of the time, arguments would ensue at the dinner table when she would make shocking comments regarding religion and churches, which was a huge part of the book she was writing. Her hatred was extremely judgmental and though I'm not a religious person, nor attend church, her words were cruel and disturbing. She truly believes that all pastors of all religion are corrupt and going to hell, as well as leading all their sheep to slaughter. When I would try to express how negative that was to condemn all those people, she would lash out at me as if I was the enemy. And I really think I became an enemy in her mind. She even accused me of being under the devil's wiles. It became clear she had no interest in spending time with me as I only seemed to agitate her. Her beliefs were so far from what she once believed ... a Presbyterian Sunday School teacher in my childhood days. It really seemed best to leave her alone as much as possible for all our sake, as it really bothered Sam to hear us bickering.

Sam didn't like that mom and I fought so much, and he had told me a few times that I should be quiet ... don't react to her comments which always lead to arguments ... sometimes as stupid as arguing over arguments. I got to thinking that maybe that was why he was so quiet, because she had a sarcastic remark for everything, or at the least would make nonsense jokes at everything ... things that weren't funny. She told me I was too sensitive and serious because I have compassion and empathy, which I saw little if any in her. If there was a disaster in the world and I made comment how sad and awful it was, her response every single time was, "The Bible predicts it and no one is going to escape." I really didn't understand her attitude or way of thinking, and as hard I tried to remain quiet, she would push me over the edge. Many times, many, many times I would go to my room in the backyard and scream and cuss to relieve the pressure exploding in my head.

One day, I had heard enough of her saying how I spoiled Sam, and I lashed out that, "I'll be sure not to spoil you, mom!" Her jealousy and resentment were probably out of her own guilt, since she never spoiled him, and had left him to rot in his old worn-out recliner in their cluttered and filthy mobile home. And it gives me no pleasure to speak these things, but they are the truth and they matter to the near insanity I was driven to, time and time again. My family, friends and co-worker could tell the stress I was under, and I swear she aged me a decade older than I am.

I really couldn't understand her attitude until I had shared my experiences with others. I was told, by many people, that she had dementia and was advised to take her to the doctor. After I couldn't handle her any longer, I finally did make that appointment. Before going, I had written the doctor a report of issues I was having, and specifically asked him to focus on dementia. I took the letter to his office days before our appointment. I had had this doctor for over forty years. He knew me well. After the visit, he prescribed her donepezil. He didn't tell her she had dementia, and I didn't

say a word, but I knew that the medication was what is given to people who have it. The medication seemed to help. I called the doctor later that day and he confirmed to me she was in the early stages.

That was a difficult report to accept. The thought depressed me and I began to research the matter to learn more about it. It was hard to believe sometimes because she seemed mentally capable. One day she started talking about getting Sam a cat, telling me that there was a stray cat back home that Sam would feed every morning, and she thought he would enjoy having one. She searched Craig's List and found one that I discovered was miles out in the country. I drove them out there and they fell in love with this long-hair black and gray female named Muffy. After bringing Muffy home, she hid under my mom's bed for a month, only coming out at night to eat and use the litter box. One day, while standing in my mom's bedroom, I told her that if Muffy doesn't come out soon, we need to think about rehoming her, saying what good is it to have a pet you never see. The strangest thing happened the very next day. It was as if Muffy knew and understand what I had said because all of sudden she came out, and never went back under the bed.

Unfortunately, Muffy didn't take to Sam and became my mom's cat. Muffy slept in her bed every night, and laid on her lap while the two of them watched their nightly movie together. Other than dinner time, it was the only time she came out of her room – excluding outings. I could tell that Sam was hurt that Muffy didn't seem to like him, and perhaps mom knew it too. One day, they came home after shopping with a parakeet in a cage. She set the cage on the living room table for Sam to watch. He loved watching birds and in Manteca he had built a lot of bird houses in their backyard. Sam seemed very excited about it, and named the parakeet Lucy. When I asked why Lucy, I learned then he had a thing for Lucille Ball. In that moment I realized why he commented to my mom to dye her hair red whenever she went to the salon for her regular perms. Apparently, he had been asking her for years to dye her hair red, which she never would do, yet, every time he wanted to go the barbershop, she wouldn't allow that, saying they butcher his hair and she can't stand to look at him. She said she had been cutting his hair for nearly forty years. He even asked me if I would take him to the barbershop, but mom would adamantly warn me that I better not.

When mom became attached to Muffy she seemed to mellow out a bit after that ... or perhaps it was the new medication. She did seem to get a bit better, I noticed upon occasion, like when we traveled to Portland twice for our two granddaughter's weddings. Sam was overjoyed to be able to have that experience and he did quite well, although his need to use the bathroom often was a challenge. This issue was a problem wherever we went, but he refused to use adult pullups. The problem got so bad that my mom quit going to Costco because of it. We also didn't go out to eat as much as we had because of it.

Sam had been here for one and half years and the night before he passed away, he told me at the dinner table I was the best nurse he ever had and he thanked me. I thought was a little strange. He called my mom Rose, his mother's name, and she corrected him. I believe he knew his time had come and was hallucinating. That night I got the alarm that woke me up and I rushed into the house. I found my mother sitting next to Sam in his lift chair. She was worried something was

wrong with him because he had been calling out her name. When she left the room, I sat down to ask him if he was ok. He didn't respond. I sat awhile and then I told my mom to stay with him until he falls asleep and I went back to my room.

Around six o'clock am the alarm went off again. I jumped up and ran into the house. I found my mom standing over his body laying flat on the floor. He was struggling to breathe as she frantically kept going on that she heard a noise and it woke her up, saying she found him crawling around and I think she laid him down. I knew I had to pull him up quick so he could breathe as I knew his lungs were collapsing. The whole reason he slept in a recliner/lift chair was to keep him from laying down flat. I managed to get him sitting up for a few seconds and then proceeded to pull him up to his lift chair. Mom had gone back to room and was sitting at her desk in a state of fear. When I got Sam into his chair, I looked him in the eyes and asked if it was time to call 911. He was barely breathing as he mumbled, "I think so." I hollered to mom to make the call and she called 911. I told her to sit with him while I waited for the ambulance. When they arrived, I ran outside yelling, "Bring oxygen, he can't breathe." They grabbed their equipment and we all ran inside.

Immediately, the lady medic checked his oxygen level and I heard her say it was too low, looking at one of the male medics shaking her head. She never hooked him up to the oxygen. While one man was checking all his vitals, another man was in my mom's bedroom questioning my mom on what his medical directives were, and she kept saying he didn't want to be hooked up to life support. She was in a state of confusion, and perhaps shock as well while digging through her medical records to provide to the man. It was only minutes later when Sam passed. I had stayed in Sam's room observing the situation when I heard the lady say in a low tone that he was gone. The man shouted out to my mom if it was ok to do CPR and she said yes. While she remained in her room, the three medics then quickly lifted his dead body and laid him on the floor on top of a plastic sheet. They had given him two epi shots while the one man performed CPR. Watching Sam's stomach and chest blow up and down over and over, knowing his ribs had to be crushed with such pressure, was a horrible sight, and I was relieved that Sam had already passed so he didn't feel such pain as that.

Shortly after that the house was full of people. There were the ambulance medical team, the fire department crew, and the police pair all packed inside the house. Eventually most all left, and my mom didn't come out of her bedroom, at first. After the CPR failure, and as soon as they pronounced him deceased, she went on Facebook and posted a message that Sam was dead. I was shocked about that, but more so when the medic told her she could sit with Sam until the coroner arrived, and she said there was no need, he wasn't in that body. When the ambulance people left, there were only two policemen left, and I stood with them in the kitchen waiting for the coroner and the funeral home folks to arrive. When I went to check on her, she wasn't in her room. I saw the door to Sam's room was closed so I knew she was in there. When I opened the door, I saw her sitting on the floor next to his body and she started insisting that he was still alive. The police heard her going on about his hand moved, saying he's still alive over and over. The policeman told her it was just the body nerves and assured her he was gone.

When the coroner and funeral people showed up they brought a gurney in and lifted Sam onto the table. The funeral man spread a United States flag over his body, as he was a veteran, and they headed for the door. The funeral man asked if we had anything we wanted to say and my said no. I, on the other hand, had held it together throughout the entire ordeal, but in that moment, I lost all control. I leaned over and held Sam and cried, telling him how much I loved him. Then, they rolled him out and drove away.

I was feeling numb about then, and I suppose my mother was too. We didn't speak a word. I went back to my room and it wasn't long when the calls started coming in. Some family members had saw the news on Facebook and were upset to have found out like that. I hadn't even had time to call anyone, and I wished they hadn't seen her post before I did. The family wanted to know if we were going to have a service, and so a few days later I asked mom about that. When she said that there was no need I told her there was a need, that people need closure. She really didn't understand such a need, which is why she had no intentions of doing anything. When I told the family this, they were very upset insisting Sam deserved to have a service.

Several weeks after Sam's passing, I went to her again regarding a service, and after instilling guilt, and shame perhaps, she said she would make arrangements. They had purchased their burial plots decades ago in a historic cemetery in Manteca, CA, but since moving to Oregon they decided to both be cremated. I told mom that Sam should have a military service and I would help with all the arrangements. However, without consulting me she called the golf course where her and Sam had their farewell party and ordered a full spaghetti dinner for seventy-five people. She didn't tell me for a couple of days, and only when I asked her about the plans. When she told me this I then asked if she notified everyone there of when and where to attend. She said no. I asked her then how anyone is going to know to attend, and I insisted that she needed to get announcements out. At first, she said she would pay for an announcement in the local newspaper. I told her it should be made more personal than that.

It took a while to get her to make the calls, but she finally did notify a few close friends and one family relative still living. I then got on the phone and called the cemetery to let them know the situation and they took the reins and arranged everything so Sam could have a full military funeral. Everything finally came together and I felt so much better about it, although it continued to bother me that she had little feelings about it. It seemed she just wanted to get it over with. I continually tried to remind myself that she had dementia, though she continually insisted it was me with me with the mental problem. There was something wrong with me, she would say time and again. It was me who needed help. And, in a huge way, I really did need help.

We traveled to California a couple of weeks later with the urn in hand and daughter and grandson traveling along side. My bother and his wife came from Alabama, and the rest were local. All in all, there were about fifty people present. After a wonderful meal and visit, we all headed to the gravesite. The hole was dug and about six or seven service men stood at attention holding rifles. Mom was given the flag and a pouch with the bullet casings. It was a beautiful service and one Sam truly deserved. He was loved by all that knew him, an active volunteer and dedicated citizen to that town. He had many articles written about him for his contributions. Thankfully, because of that, word spread of his death and service. So many nice folks showed up, and I was worried

few would be there. Of course, there was tons of food left and I had the place make up to-go boxes so people grabbed one on their way out.

One nice thing happened during that time. I was able to reconnect with my brother Rusty. For many years, decades really, we were kept apart by his wife who didn't like me. For years I tried to get along with her until one day I told my brother I loved him, but I couldn't have anything to do with him as long as she was in the picture. On that trip, her and I found a path to get along and put the past behind us. We sat in their car and got stoned, laughing and chatting about old times. The next night, we all went out to dinner together. The ice had broke and it was a joy to have my brother back. Family drama had always been between us since he married her. She has passed away now, a most tragic death, but my brother and I are closer than we've been in decades.

When we returned home, I decided to stay out in my room and not take Sam's room inside. The more I stayed away from my mom the better. But things only got worse between us and it was like living in a nightmare. When she snapped one night while quarreling and marched into the kitchen and opened the knife drawer, taking hold of a large butcher knife and waving it around at me, screaming to kill her, I knew then something was very wrong, very, very wrong. I wrote the doctor another letter expressing that, and other details of the situation. I was told to record everything for my own protection, and I did. When Sam passed, that started an entire new chapter of my life.

Though Sam was my step father, for over forty-years he had been like a dad to me, and certainly he was grandpa to my girls. I feel I honored him in a way I never got to with my own dad. And I truly hope when my mother passes that I can honor her as well. I believe we should honor are father and mother despite the issues between us, but at that time, the thought was not easy to assume. At that time, I felt deep disrespect for her and only time would either heal us or destroy us. Only time would tell, yet it would be a long time before I would know for sure, and we had many more battles to get through before then. I questioned many times whether I would survive the ordeal, the duty, the responsibility my two brothers had no intention of helping, and I couldn't blame them. I suppose what hurts the most is I feel I have sacrificed my life for hers, and through it all, I feel less alive.

The loneliness of carrying such a weight is one I would never wish upon another. To this day, I struggle to maintain a positive and hopeful spirit, but it has taken many years to find this level of self-survival, and it would take many more years of dealing with the situation that has limited my freedom. I'm obligated till death, be it hers or mine.