

Listening with Mom

As a child, I remember visiting my parents' and grandparents' elderly friends and relatives. They tended to live in old, strangely-furnished houses with large and silent rooms and from time to time they would migrate to hospitals or the rare (in the 40's and early 50's) nursing home, and then would come a funeral. For me, the visits to Baldwinsville or Montour Falls or Aunt Ida's Lake Ontario beach home were ordeals of deportment and self-control only occasionally relieved by refreshments. I didn't know then that I was building connections that would prepare me for my own times of sitting and waiting, weaving my own tapestry of memories with my loved ones.

This afternoon I am listening to music with Mom. As has been the case for several months, she appears to be oblivious to my presence. Attended or not, she sleeps the day away, waking only enough to selectively eat the sweet portions of her meals. But I know she can hear the music. Her room is a peaceful place. There is always the muted background hum of any health-care facility but she is, thank God, spared the intrusive cacophony of a hospital and it is not too hard to evoke memories of her sitting in our living room with Dad, in concert. We are listening, today, to selections from Andrew Lloyd Weber, at this moment *Pi  Jes * sung by Charlotte Church. Mom's long journey into the shadows began more than 10 years ago so it's doubtful that she recognizes this or the selections from *Phantom* but she sits here, eyes closed, listening, swathed in the beauty of the music and her legacy of love.

After this I will play the Gershwin CD, still labeled "Property of George Green" in Dad's neat script. Gershwin holds a lifetime of memories for me; for Mom his music is contemporary with Dad. I picture her sitting here in this place of endings thinking about their beginnings at the Eastman Theater so long ago when Dad would seat her for the evening, leave her for his ushering duties, and return to slip into the seat beside her when the lights went down. I know for a fact that every time Dad listened to *Concerto in F* he recalled the night he and Mom heard it in Rochester. Did they dream about this future, I wonder? What plans did they have? Did they dream of jobs, homes, children, grand and great-grand children, travel, retirement, and long quiet years with each other at the end of life? I doubt any of us can imagine our life ahead very well, but I know that whatever future they envisioned it would always include music. So here I am, child of these two, listening to the music they loved with Mom sleeping away the afternoon and Dad eerily present in my recollections.

While I listen, I read her mail, pay her bills, balance her accounts, write letters – and watch her sleep. Sometimes I hold her. She is very small now and bears faint resemblance to the mother in my childhood pictures, but I kiss her hair and say, "I love you Mommy". A year ago she might have mumbled a garbled response but she is closer to home now and I don't think she hears much from this world except for the music. (The only lucid response she has made today was to answer the question "Mom, they're playing *Concerto in F* – do you recognize it?" to which she clearly answered "Yes".) I understand better now how Dad got through all those years alone. She is precious to me even as she just sleeps peacefully, loved and cared for, even as we were precious to her when she visited our rooms late at night long years ago. A few weeks before he died last year, Dad told me, "I always thought I would outlive your mother. Now I'm not so sure. If I'm gone, remember ... remember you still have a mother who needs you." I understand, Dad, and I will always remember.