Published in
Sudden Flash
May 19, 2025

Legacy

When I wake up at 3am these days because of chronic pain in my knee or neck or hands, I think about my late mother in the morning. She died in 1999 after a long illness and she hasn't left. I see her everywhere, but especially very late at night.

Auburn hair well-brushed, she would sit quietly in the L-Shaped Washington Heights kitchen with her back to the window as if she wasn't ready to engage with something as simple as the view of another six-story, cream-colored brick apartment house built in the Thirties. Or the small bowl of cottage cheese that waited for her spoon.

Reading *The New York Times* that my father had brought before he went to work, she would have a cup or two of instant Nescafe, take aspirin for her arthritis, and smoke her first Pall Mall of the day while she put herself together. The Yiddish words she used to explain it—*"Ich muss mich zusamenstellen*" literally meant "I have to assemble myself" and the phrase always seemed both weighty to me, and a little comic. In her red-and-white robe she might have been a human stop sign. STOP. Construction Zone Ahead.

I never thought of her as anything other than "together." Brisk, highly-educated, fiendishly well-read and speaking French, German, Russian, Polish, English and Yiddish, she was quick in her judgments and firm in her opinions. In the Nixon era she dismissed him as a fascist and said that a speech by his vice president Spiro Agnew was "like Stalin on a bad day."

She was in her sixties when her fingers started becoming gnarled and painful because of arthritis and she would gaze at them and sigh, "Getting old is miserable."

In *my* sixties, and after various surgeries, I feel far less "put together" than I was ten years ago, I can't help but agree with her. I don't smoke, but I have many pills at breakfast and can't even get to them or food before a few cups of coffee to clear my head. And I often have cottage cheese for breakfast, though mine is organic.

My fingers aren't twisted, but arthritis has wrecked both my thumbs and one knee. Taking stairs hurts, using certain tools hurts, and sometimes just rolling over in bed at night hurts.

Yet thinking of my mother, hearing her husky smoker's voice in my head, I feel oddly soothed. It's taken me years to realize that I am so much like her: though I don't smoke, I have more opinions than one person needs, I can't get my day going until I read the *New York Times* and have my coffee, and I speak several languages.

Pain is now another thing we share.