



The End at The Beginning

“Goodbye, love.”

My mother’s valedictory made me pause and turn back one last time to offer a final parting wave.

Her smile was brave, but her eyes remained fixed on me, as if she knew it would be our last goodbye. I had no choice. I had to leave.

The world was beginning to shrink around us as the pandemic spread. Airports threatened to close, flights grew scarce, and uncertainty hung in the air like a thick fog. My partner, Lisa, and I were faced with an impossible choice: stay in

the British Isles, risking indefinite separation from our home in Adelaide, or leave as soon as possible before the shutters came crashing down, trapping us in some form of living purgatory.

Every instinct urged me to escape before it was too late. I dreaded the idea of being stranded in a country that no longer felt like home—especially as it suffocated me with its grey skies and overcrowded towns. Stories of others trapped in pandemic no-man’s-land were surfacing, and our departure increasingly resembled a mercy flight back. Borders were beginning to close, ensnaring wandering travellers for uncertain durations.

I had sensed what was coming, but what I didn't foresee was that this would be the last time I'd see my mother alive. Within a year, she would succumb to sepsis and other aging ailments, despite the best efforts we made from the other side of the world to keep her safe. We had managed to house her, feed her, purchase what she needed for creature comforts, but were helpless to stop time and its effects on the human body.

Throughout life, my mother had always been resilient, yet in her old age, her body seemed to betray her. It was a slow decline I had failed to notice until that moment of parting. The Peter Pan figure who had once bounded through life with a light step had disappeared, replaced by

an unhappy old woman weighed down by time and immobilised by a crushing sense of loneliness. Her body language hinted at weariness, like time was nearing its end, but I didn't take the time to ask her if there was anything deeper to explore. Sure, I took her to her regular doctor visits, but she was more interested in showing me off to her doctor and treating their session like a coffee get-together between girlfriends. The tonic of going out in public and conversing with people seemed to perk her up, so I suspected nothing out of the ordinary with her, apart from old age aches and pains.

Like a silken movie screen, my thoughts replayed the projection of our goodbye scene

across the clouds below our flight path, revealing tell-tale signs I had previously ignored. The travel excitement helped my emotions to settle down, allowing me to see things a little clearer, highlighting clues of my mother's mental wellbeing that I previously had missed.

I began to recall moments before I moved to Australia with Lisa, where I would come across my mother in the small, cluttered kitchen of our old house. Her thumb would be pressed firmly on the electric kettle button as it boiled well past its limit with what seemed her favourite smell of burnt toast lingering in the air. On each of those reflective moments, she had stood leaning against the kitchen counter, her back

to me; gazing out the window at the overgrown garden, quietly conversing in a dulcet voice with someone unseen. It was peculiar in the sense of the tone of familiarity she used, like her conversations were with someone she knew intimately. The endless steam from the kettle, the hum of the washing machine, the worn floor tile beneath her feet, and the faint drone of the American-style fridge all seemed to fade away as she spoke. It was as though she was mentally elsewhere or could see something I couldn't.

There were other times I overheard my mother talking to herself in her bedroom. Another odd occurrence I dismissed as unimportant. Talking to yourself can help cope

with a lot of emotional stress. My mother frequently pointed out that she was still grieving for her late husband—my stepfather, and grief is a valid reason for conversations with thin air. It's called *Imagined Companionship*. However, on occasion, I would be in the living room listening to her footsteps in her bedroom directly above—dancing. Again, unusual, because she had arthritic ankles that bothered her immensely.

I never pressed her on her secret conversations. Still, her open discussions would frequently bombard me with complaints about those said swollen ankles, arthritis, failing hearing, and the “gadgets” she struggled to operate, like modern TV remotes and

microwave oven controls. For that reason, I would have expected her to tell me if she thought she was dying. It was something she often wished for in moments of frustration with a modern world she found increasingly difficult to navigate.

“I wish I had a gun,” she would exclaim in her familiar Irish lilt. “I’d end it right here and now.”

I either dismissed or disregarded her private ramblings. They were always delivered with a certain level of amateur dramatics. To me, it was obviously a demand for attention, but a scenario too far-fetched to feed it any concern.

Her misgivings and complaints seemed to be a protestation against a world moving too fast

for her to keep up with and a society becoming too complicated for her to care about anymore.

Perhaps, she had simply given up—willing herself towards an end. I don't really know, but I wish I had been there when she passed, if only to hold her hand and give her someone to say goodbye to instead of dying alone in the middle of the night, in her bed, in surroundings she hated.

I've had plenty of time to analyse my moment of departure—trying to understand things from her perspective, and it must have been terrifying for her to be left alone in such unfamiliar surroundings with sterile, off-white walls void of any familiar trinkets or

photographs to remind her she wasn't without family.

The room's single window offered no comfort at all—overlooking a grey concrete courtyard, while the air in the room felt thick and stifling and far too hot for her liking. She must have felt trapped staying in a place that wasn't hers, in housing so unfamiliar that it might have well been a Siberian Gulag. But she had refused to come back to Australia with us, so we were faced with no other option than to accept the local council's emergency accommodation offer of assisted living. Potential homelessness of an elderly person stirred them into reactive response mode, and I, for one, was grateful to them for easing our burden.

Lisa and I had done all we could to dissuade my mother from her decision, but she stubbornly dug her heels in, hoping we would be the ones to capitulate first. We couldn't, she wouldn't, so we were left with one choice: to return home.

The cold truth was that both Lisa and I needed to get back to work. Our tickets were already paid for, our UK house had been sold, and, like my mother, we were also homeless in the small Berkshire town where we all had once lived together. Even the offer of a two-day layover in Qatar couldn't persuade her to change her mind, so we headed to the airport, reassured that she was safe for the time being, allowing us time to change her viewpoint from

afar and possibly persuade her to live with us in Australia. At the very least, and for the immediate future, she had a roof over her head.

We left the UK just before Covid lockdowns took hold. But even as we sat on board the plane during our long 29-hour journey back to Adelaide, my thoughts remained behind—fixed on my mother.

Staring blankly through my seat window, I pictured her standing in that narrow hallway, her figure small and frail against the doorframe, looking like a lost little girl separated from everything and everyone she loved. A faint look of concern on her face had almost made me turn back to her, but I knew if I did, I would have doubted my decision to leave right there

and then. Instead, I averted my eyes and continued onto the stairwell, descended the stairs and exited the building.

I still hear her voice, clear as day.

"Do you have to go?"

"I do," I replied—protesting the unfair question. "Otherwise, we'll be stuck here without a place to live."

"You could rent a place, no?"

"We can't afford to. We need to get back to work."

"Alright, love. I understand. I do."

Her brave attempt at a smile remains etched forever in memory, a reminder of a mother I left behind and a mother I can never return to. It

was a goodbye in every sense of the word—not just for that parting, but for everything that was and everything that could never be again. We both understood there were things left unsaid, yet somehow, there didn't seem to be a need to voice them in the urgency of leaving. The look in her eyes said it all.

She was letting go long before I understood, perhaps still clinging to the belief that her son's leaving was temporary. That somehow, with the help of St. Anthony, I would return to her. But I had no intentions of the sort.

I also could not re-enact the miracle of bilocation—something St. Anthony had purportedly achieved by once being in two places at the same time. No, I had the Internet

for that little technological wonder and believed I could solve my mother's crisis using modern, realistic methods.

The pandemic, the frantic scramble to find her a place to stay, the escape back to the land of Oz—all those things I thought were some of the greatest challenges of my life—now seem small compared to the simple reality of her absence. I naively thought we could address her issues in telephone conversations, but like all things left too late, those topics were not given much consideration. Most of our phone calls quickly became one-sided diatribes relating to how unhappy she was, how lonely her life had become, and how she despised her surroundings.

What was evidently missing from those calls was the animated stories she liked to tell me of her Irish upbringing and the childhood friends she would entertain in the lanes of Limerick. Instead, she chose to loudly vocalise as many complaints as she could about her predicament, inflicting on me an Irish mother's guilt that I had spent my life trying to resist and repel. I tried to listen with a desire to understand, but her ranting produced callous, disparaging remarks from me, like, "You could have come with us," or "You are not my responsibility." The latter, I sincerely regretted blurting out before creating an excuse to hang up on her.

She would make me feel so bad about the situation, I would ignore it instead of dealing with it. Like Covid, her emotional malaise was infectious, transferring a debilitating energy drain from my own wellbeing, resulting in waves of dread and stress when she called. This resulted in me keeping chat time short and strictly to the point of just filling her grocery orders, before abruptly ending those taxing conversations.

When the news arrived of her passing, guilt and weariness were cast aside, leaving a cloud of sadness hovering over me that posed overwhelming questions about my own involvement in her passing. Had I done enough? Had I been a good son? What could I

have done or said differently? Lisa assured me I had done everything I could to try and make my mother happy, but I truly believe it wasn't enough. In many ways, I let her down. But I was out of ideas and energy to deal with her. So, inevitably, I failed her.

My final phone call overseas was a scripted eulogy uttered via a Facebook video from Australia to her graveside, broadcast through my cousin's iPhone. The reason for not travelling back to the UK for her funeral was due to an aversion to flying long distances after suffering a blood clot in my left leg from our previous visit to the UK. So, funeral arrangements, cremation and burial in the

family grave were all arranged by me online—
society's own bilocation miracle and a
technology that my mother could never grasp
the concept of.

“Gadgets, St. Anthony!” I hear her cry out.

In time I made my peace with the guilt I once
carried, realising there was never anything I
could have said to change her ways or persuade
her otherwise. She was Irish in the old way—
proud, stubborn, and careful with the truth,
and in our family some truths were simply left
to their silence. She never admitted to me that
she was fading. Perhaps, that's why she
obstinately refused to come with us to
Australia. Perhaps, her excuse of the travel

time being too long was a veil to hide the fact that, physically, it would have been too strenuous for her.

Perhaps, she needed to face her final days in her own way, on her own terms. That would have been typical of her: going out on her schedule, her time. She had always lived following her own timetable. It was the last modicum of independence she managed to personally control.

Perhaps it was simply her time and her time alone to go.

Whatever the real reason was, her absence is felt every day, yet at times, so is her presence, manifesting in memories, in stories, and in the quiet, subtle ways her words invade my head.

Though she's gone, she's not truly lost. If I were to share any of her religious beliefs, then maybe St. Anthony found her aimlessly wandering around and guided her home to her final rest.

The love we shared—despite our own mother-son hiccups along the way—has been captured in countless small moments over the years. Reminders of who she was and still is to me.

My mother would often remind me that, “You only have one mother in this life.” I did, I have, I had, and because of her, there exist a few remembrances keeping her alive in small ways that never fail to stir my emotions.

The most tender one is depicted in a photograph capturing a timeless moment in London's Fortune Green Park on a sunny day in West Hampstead:

My mother is pictured sitting on the soft grass. The distant laughter of children can almost be heard playing nearby, and in the air, the smell of freshly cut grass tickles the nose, while a faint breeze can be felt rustling the leaves of the nearby oak trees before sweeping down to ruffle my mother's pleated skirt. The sky is a brilliant blue—presumably, as the photo is in black & white and there's not a cloud in sight.

In her arms, my mother cradles an infant—me. The devotion in her eyes is palpable as they

appear eternally locked onto mine—her expression distinctly reflecting the pride of motherly love.

It is a beautiful frozen instant of pure happiness—a snapshot that had been stored away for posterity’s sake.

Months after her death, it would be discovered in an almost discarded box of family photos, breaking an only child’s grieving heart...

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