



The quiet when it all falls away

Helping her mother through Alzheimer's disease, Heather Menzies grew comfortable with silence

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Elizabeth Anne Menzies, a doctor's daughter from Quebec, was called Beaver by her friends because she'd been so busy as a child.

Her daughter Heather -- an Ottawa non-fiction writer and lecturer -- remembers her mother as a busy adult. She would tend her garden with a well-worn spade and build elaborate birdhouses to attract tree swallows and martins to the yard. She had no qualms about killing predatory starlings.

Beaver -- or Anne, as she was also called -- wore red lipstick and high heels and drove a car with gusto. When she and her husband went out together, he let her take the wheel.

She had firm ideas about how their four children should behave. If they didn't abide by her rules, she'd discipline them. Menzies remembers her using a strap.

She brings forth these biographical details about her late mother in *Enter Mourning*, a memoir about the last years of Beaver's life when Alzheimer's disease had set her on an "un-learning" curve, stripping away her memory and, eventually, her ability to speak.

It is, without a doubt, Menzies's most personal book. With great honesty and clarity, she explains how she -- always a dutiful daughter, though one who'd held part of herself back -- learned to go with the flow of her mother's dementia, which became evident around her 80th birthday.

In *Enter Mourning* (Key Porter Books, 237 pages, \$21.95), Menzies tells how she would visit her mother in the care home into which she had moved when she could no longer look after herself. She would make tea, which they'd drink out of two treasured cups.

"Such a lovely cup," the by-now frail older woman would comment, using just about the only words of her vocabulary that remained.

"Yes, it's a beautiful cup," Menzies would reply.

Then her mother would add: "Yours is lovely, too." And Menzies would agree: "Yes, lovely."

This dialogue repeated itself during every visit, which led me to tell Menzies, when she was in Vancouver this week, that she exhibited amazing patience during her mother's decline.

"I think I found the patience. I cultivated it over time. It was not easy because some days I did just want to run, screaming, out of the place -- you know, 'Give me a real conversation!' " said Menzies, who stopped here in 2005 to give a reading from her book *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*. (It was a work in progress when her mother was ill.)

Each time she visited Beaver, she made a point of having "something to do with my hands, motions to go through. It grounded me, and allowed there to be silence, and gave me that patience . . . Watering the plants my brother had brought, and then the making of the tea, and then cutting my mother's fingernails -- all these things that were physical activities, I was conscious of how they helped to slow me down so that I could be there."

In the same spirit, she brought her camera when she went to clear out her mother's cottage after she'd moved into the facility. She shot black-and-white photos of her gardening tools, fly swatters, sewing basket, sock drawer, bobby pins. And she developed them herself, watching images of her mother's humble belongings bloom on submerged paper.

The photos -- including one of a lovely teacup and one of a chenille bathrobe -- illustrate *Enter Mourning* poignantly.

"I don't know what prompted me to bring my camera, but I'm really glad I did," said Menzies.

"I found those artifacts, almost like an archeologist finds artifacts -- things that held the residue of my withholding myself from my mother. I was able to live the emotion, live the sense of sorrow and let it go."

Menzies and her three siblings didn't twig to their mother's Alzheimer's as early as they might have. "She had been covering for herself really well." Asked if she wishes she had done anything differently, she said: "I wish I'd contacted the Alzheimer's Society earlier and faced up to stuff a little bit more fully."

She also thinks she and her brothers and sister should have had a preliminary conversation about their long-widowed mother before she became dreadfully needy. The fact that they didn't "made for a lonelier trip, for us all," she believes.

All her life, Heather Menzies has kept a journal, a habit that gave her good notes to draw on. She doesn't write in it every evening, but "as things come up in my life, I'll feel the need to, basically, commune with myself. I sit with the journal and I write. It's partly exposition -- recording -- and partly interpretation and reflection.

"It's always been kind of my place to come home to myself."

In the book, she exposes not just her own failings (at times she monopolized Beaver, perhaps out of what one sibling called her "need to be needed"), but those of everyone close to her.

She showed her siblings a close-to-final draft -- "I wasn't going to publish this, siblings be damned" -- and was pleased that, after stipulating some minor changes and corrections, they were in favour of *Enter Mourning* being published.

One of its best features is the way Menzies describes her mother's un-learning curve, the falling-away of syntax, grammar and words themselves.

. . . Mum's sentences no longer strode boldly one after another across space and time, sure of the point they were making. They still started boldly enough, with words like 'There was a man . . . ' or 'And then we went to . . . ,' but then they veered off, petered out, dwindled away. Week in, week out, the sentences got shorter and slacker, more and more riddled with lapses and gaps, subsiding into silence. I learned to hold my tongue and not second-guess, not even . . . deflect Mum to another subject. I learned to breathe, just sit there and breathe.

Eventually, the mother and daughter who had so many times commented to each other about the loveliness of their teacups were able to be together comfortably without saying a word, the daughter just rubbing lotion into the mother's hands.

Menzies, who has spent much of her academic career thinking and writing about communication, grew to appreciate the elemental, wordless kind that feels like "pure relating" and has an almost spiritual dimension.

She said, "Alzheimer's and dementia really challenge us in our understanding of what it is to be human and to express our connection with each other.

"I got to explore some of that. I'm glad I didn't run away."

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