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1066

Mom can't remember her new neighbours' names. When I buy her flowers she can't find any vases.

Today, Mom puts a giant pork pie in her supermarket trolley, and I check its shelf life as she picks up a large packet of sausages. She is happy with her frozen meals, except for when she has to ask a neighbour to show her again how to open her microwave door. In the next aisle I steer her past the dairy-free ice cream which I say again is not ok for her diabetes. She spends so long picking up each brand of panty pads, and telling me they're the wrong type, not the ones she likes. At home later I see that she's got five unopened packs in the airing cupboard. They're Sainsbury's brand. We're in Waitrose. We both seem worn out and humourless as we head for the till.

1066. A friend has stuck her PIN number on the back of her old Rolex watch. But my mother can't always remember that she can't remember. She starts confidently on the keypad but she's forgotten her number. She puts her purse back in her handbag, unbuckles her watch, looks carefully at the tiny writing on the sticky label, and slowly keys this number into the reader. She finds it difficult to do up the watch strap again. The cashier says, "Could you try again please, Madam". Mom doesn't see the ice-cream and cakes in the trolley pushing close up behind us.

I can feel the tightness in my neck, and I imagine the cashier wondering why I don't pay, don't smooth my mother's way through this labyrinth. I help her take her watch off again, and this time I read the label, and I key in the number, ignoring my fear of treating her like a child. The card still doesn't work. I push one of my cards in, now barely able to remember my own PIN. She has to get her purse out again, replace the card, stow it safely in her bag, do that up and put the strap securely across both her shoulders. And immediately she wants to get some cash out to give to me. I put my hand over hers. "We'll settle up later, Mom".

The cashier snaps open thin carrier bags. Mom collects so many bags, she doesn't know what to do with them. She stuffs them in the freezer. On my last visit some fell out of the bathroom cabinet when I needed paracetamol.

I tuck Mom's hand into my arm, and stow the bags in my car boot. We stop at a bank on the way back to her flat. I fail to get any cash out of her account. 1066 isn't working. I get two hundred pounds out on my card to leave with her when I go back to London. "What do I owe you?" she asks later, and gets the money I've just given her out of her purse. I try to explain that there is no point her giving me the money I have just given her. I feel furious with myself for even trying to explain. When I tell her she owes me two hundred and twenty, she surprises me by carefully counting out twenty two pounds. She thinks I tried the wrong number in the bank machine and tries to remove her watch again, to show me. "Yes", I say, "1066, ok, but it didn't work, I'll phone the bank now to sort it out".

We'd gone out to lunch before going shopping and she'd prayed in public. I've always found this ritual, the 'giving of thanks', embarrassing, and I'd looked around the garden centre cafe to see whether people were watching. "Dear Loving Lord and Father thank you for your bountiful blessings and this food. Help us to use the strength derived from it in doing thy will. Forgive us our sins. In Jesus' name, Amen". I wondered which of my atheist sins she had in mind.

Now whenever I arrive at Mom's new flat, after my long drive to Birmingham, she hugs me. She feels tiny, birdlike, wobbly on her legs, but her thin arms grip tightly. When I am leaving, her hugs feel like a straight jacket, pinning my wings to my sides. When did I teach her to hug? As a child I didn't know that I wanted to be hugged. I watched cousins being held and kissed by Nanna, and thought it looked babyish, unnecessary. We didn't ever touch as a family, apart from a kiss on the cheek. Duty, not love. Sometimes Dad would steer me when we were out, his big hand on the back of my neck. It felt like control, but his touch made me tingle.

When I was six I asked Mom whether she loved me. She said, "I love you when you're good". I remember the terrible hurt. Now she responds to my 'lots of love' at the end of phone calls by saying 'same to you'. The last time I visited, she said "You're a very good girl, aren't you?" I had been irritable and impatient, but is this her way of telling me now that she loves me?

The phone call to the bank is hard work. My Power of Attorney doesn't seem to have worked its way through to the call centre staff. They insist on speaking to Mom. How to tell them that she's got memory problems, while she sits opposite me, listening? She can't answer the security questions, can't remember her own maiden name. It takes three phone calls and Mom is

finally asked to pass the phone to me. They tell me the card has been blocked. The wrong PIN had been entered too many times. They will post a copy of the number to Mom.

She rings a few days later. “I’ve had a letter and I don’t know what I have to do”. I prompt, trying to guess without assuming too much. “I’m not very good at”. I wait. I think she means “remembering”. And I’m used to these pauses, these reversals, things being the wrong way round between us. I get her to open the security envelope and read me her PIN number. The key, the code, the answer. Upside down. “9901, that’s my number. Shall I stick it on my watch?”