



Left, the writer and his mother.
Below, the writer in
his Clinton Hill home.

White Pin Cushions

With Red Buttons

Rescuing an aged mother from
a mediocre nursing institution
and caring for her at home

BY DEXTER JEFFRIES

The last time I saw my mother's breasts I was about five. Running into the bathroom to get a quick drink of water, I didn't know she was in the tub. It was Saturday, her usual day for a relaxing bubble bath, but this custom had yet to make an impression on my 5-year-old mind. Now, before she could slide beneath the pink froth, I felt a thrill and a shock. She was very gracious: "Dex, you know you should always knock before opening a door." I

backed away with remorse and looked, stared, and never forgot those white pincushions with red buttons.

Jump to September 2003, right after Labor Day. My formerly hard working, politically active, and jitterbugging mother of the 1940s found that she simply could not "get up" out of bed. I received the call before going to work. I asked what did she mean, and she just repeated those same words: "I can't get up." Her new condition, deemed permanent from the doctor's perspective, hastened my sister and I placing her in a nursing home.

It was not a "first rate" home, but our objections were few because

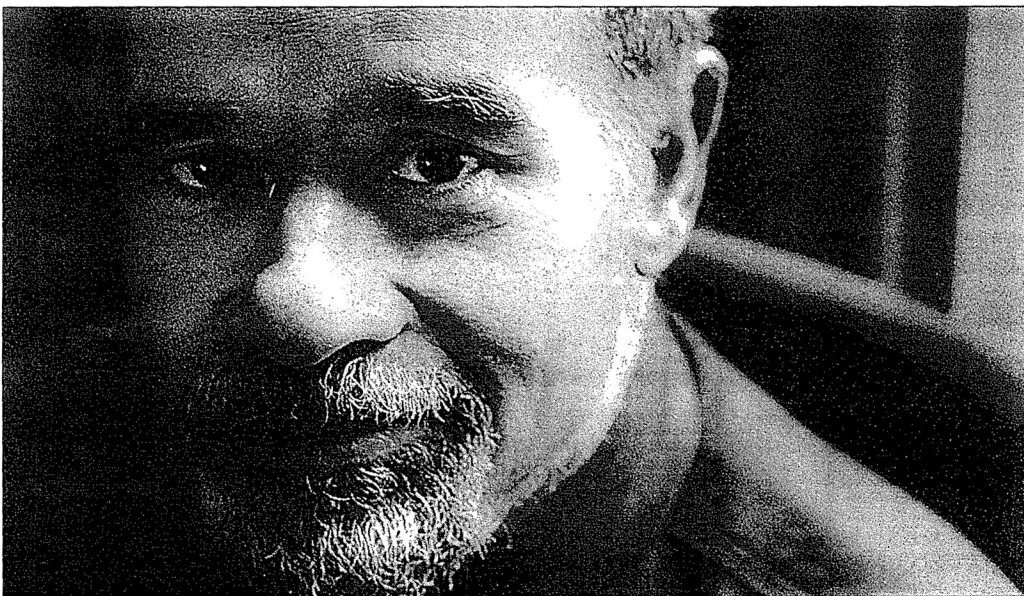


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there were real limitations on our finances. In truth, the Sutton Manor (the name has been changed for privacy) was mediocre in all respects. The staff did their jobs, it was clean, but the operation as a whole did not instill any confidence in me as to my mother's future health. The English spoken in the hallways and elevators possessed that Caribbean lilt which can be either comforting or threatening. I overheard "Mrs. Jeffries" spoken soothingly; at other times, "Mrs. Jeffries" sounded acerbic and sarcastic. After visiting the home on a few Saturdays, my sister who was visiting from California made a decision. We did not know where my mother was going to stay, but she was not going to remain at Sanford much longer.

There, the aides discouraged my mom from using her walker because they thought she would be safer in a wheel chair. So my mom no longer walked anywhere. Her arms were useless, couldn't turn the wheels, so she used her feet. All you heard was that quiet scuffing sound her tennis shoes made on linoleum floors that have too many layers of wax on them and need to be stripped on occasion. I will never forget the day my stalwart friend from the west of Ireland said to my mother: "Come on Marilyn, you can get up. You can get up if you want to." Marian repeated these words with an extra Galway inflection for emphasis. "Come on ye, I've seen a baby calf walk 'round after a half-hour and here ye be, knockin' 'bout for eighty-five years. Come on. Get yourself up."

I am not a religious person, but my mom started to slither and swish from one side of the wheel chair to another. She rolled around in the chair a bit, grabbed both arms, and like a miracle catapulted herself into Marian's arms. "There, I knew ye could do it." My mom walked around the whole floor of the nursing home garnering applause here and there. With a little motivation and desire, I saw that she was capable of progress when it came to her walking. She was delighted when she heard the applause. The clapping hands of the staff made her smile.

In November, guilt, obligation, or duty — one of those factors — inspired a decision that was to have more import than getting married. I informed the staff of the nursing home that my mom was going to live with me. They were impressed and supportive. I decided to take care of my mom and share my two-bedroom apartment with her. Logistically, it seemed ideal. I would give her the master bedroom with the extra bath, which would sort out our daily privacy concerns.

I had a few last-minute worries, but the head doctor at the Sutton was quick to comfort me. "Mr. Jeffries," he said. "Anything is better than institutionalization. Anything. Remember that. Anything is better than being here."

With a week to prepare the apartment for my mom's arrival, my friend

Jack and I installed handrails throughout the apartment. Another friend, Sherrie, suggested removing the shower door since it would be a permanent encumbrance for my mother when entering or leaving the shower. Having my mother move in also forced me to take a ten-year inventory of clothes and books that were just gathering memories, and I finally was motivated to act. How many editions of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* did I need? Were those giant floppy disks from another era that held dated information truly necessary? After cleaning, painting, and waxing, the apartment took on a needed sheen, and I was proud of the work that we put into it.

No matter what their condition, an elderly person is dying. It is hard to admit that. It's hard to say that. It's hard to think about it. As you shepherd them through the days, you keep looking for improvements, no matter how small or insignificant. You are confident that all of your work and effort and time will pay off. Making the oatmeal just the right way, putting the raisins in while the oatmeal is still hot. Buying *Newsday* and ridding it of all circulars save those for Pathmark. Taking your mom's socks and cutting the elastic band away to ease the circulation around her ankles. Putting the eye drops in as carefully as possible. Cutting the pills in half and not losing either piece. All this does something and nothing. The nothing is more pronounced.

These many small chores and duties ironically inform your inadequacies. A routine like food shopping becomes an ordeal as you discover that half of the products on your mom's shopping list do not exist or aren't at the local grocer. You're embarrassed as people repeat the name of the product, shake their heads, and then shake their heads again. Low salt, low sodium, no sugar, no salt, one percent, two percent, low fat, fat-free, no caffeine, decaffeinated; the list of special requirements is infinite. After knowing and breathing New York City for decades, you finally admit that in order to do this shopping competently, it will mean three trips to three different stores.

Frustrating. It is frustrating to admit that a private home is not commensurate with a nursing institution. My mother was assigned an aide for a major portion of every day. Still, the aide and I were not psychologically equipped to create an environment adequate to a senior citizen's needs. My house may have possessed the correct physical infrastructure, but it could never generate the required stimuli for a senior who needs exercise and physical therapy on a regular basis.

To make matters worse, the social institutions and bureaucracies that were developed to facilitate the han-

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dling of the elderly function with classic "Catch-22" precision, leaving you speechless and in harm's way. For instance, my mom was ambulatory, but with restrictions. Not being able to get up on her own was an important aspect of her medical profile. Yes, once up, she was on her way. However, she could not get out of the bed without help. During one of the earliest visits from a social worker that interviewed me, I discovered that my healthy presence was an obstacle to my mother receiving certain types of care. If a healthy adult is living at home with an elderly person, they should share in the responsibility of the care. I could not argue with that. Still, there were unforeseen complications.

A social worker from the Brooklyn Nursing Division, armed with a laptop computer, makes you nervous as she takes a marker, points, checks, and slashes while you move uncomfortably in your seat. Every now and then she smiles, with eyes raised, to allay your discomfort. Ultimately it does not work because a tragic sigh comes at the end of all this checking and slashing and pinpointing.

"Mr. Jeffries, based on your moth-

er's condition and the fact that you're healthy, oh, this is the formula I used under plan R, you see, Plan R, this shows how many hours of care your mother is eligible for. Go down this list, she can have an aide, you see, twelve hours."

There are twenty-four hours in a day, so twenty-four minus twelve, is twelve. Twelve hours of my mom, unattended. Twelve hours of me being in charge of her life. Twelve hours — that's a long time. However, feeling resilient and resourceful, I adapted to my new obligations and responsibilities by modifying my own work schedule. Shopping would be the same except there would be some new items that I had never heard of: Adult underwear, bed sheets, and double-absorbent elastic diapers. I couldn't even remember seeing them in my peripheral vision at Pathmark. No matter, ask and I was sure I would find them. Washing — I could handle that. If not, drop a bag off at the laundromat. Let *them* do the dirty work. I felt confident and prepared until the first morning when the aide failed to show.

I walked into my mother's room that used to be mine. It was 8:30 and a half-hour had passed without a telephone call from the nursing agency. I asked my mom if she wanted to get

up. She replied, "I have to, I'm wet." The word "wet" had no meaning until I leaned over to help her up. Her entire nightgown was wet. I jerked back for a second; what I felt was cool now but pungent. I said, "Oh, that's no problem. We'll get you changed in a second."

I had her in the upright position and swung her legs to the side of the bed. There was no power or energy in her body. I lifted two legs, not legs, and they felt immense. Now I could see that moving an elderly person just a few inches required a massive amount of effort. Energy and muscle had fled her body, and I understood the meaning of the term "dead weight." There had to be another technique. I couldn't just employ brute force since my mom's bones were surely brittle and her skin was subject to bruising.

"Swish me from side to side — that's how they do it in the nursing home. Dex, you have to slide me along until we get to the edge of the bed." I leaned down, and she drew her legs up in a practiced motion. "Dexter, they teach us this at the home. It's easier to move people when their legs are bent." She was right. I used half the effort compared to my first violent exertion. "Thanks Ma, I wouldn't have figured that one

out," and I moved her along the bed.

I finally now had her on the edge of the bed with her legs dangling toward the floor, and she was sitting up. It now was just a question of walking literally five feet to the bath-

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room. I looked with confidence at the walker, which was within my grasp. "Okay, Ma, just stay on the side of the bed, and I'll get the walker." In the second that I let her go, she started to slide off the edge of the bed. My heart jumped. I dropped the walker and used my entire body to shove her back to side of the bed. "Whoa, where are you going, Ma? What happened? All you had to do was just sit there." She yelled and cursed at me for the first time in my adult life. "Do you think I

would fall off the goddamn fuckin' bed if I could stay on it?" Silence. "Well?" I just shook my head and said I should have grabbed the walker faster. I was still stunned by her swearing at me. Quickly, I started to comprehend that just as she had mastered certain acrobatic moves in the nursing home, I was going to have to become a little bit of a Balanchine myself. I started to adroitly handle situations that required three hands,

Energy and muscle had fled her body, and I understood "dead weight."

when I only had two. That meant speed, ingenuity, and more speed. Shoulders, chests, and legs were going to have to double for those missing hands.

Because I had planned the next move, inch by inch and foot by foot, my mother was now fully in charge of

her walker as we started to cross that five feet of parquet floor to the bathroom. As we walked, a large puddle of yellowish water started to appear between her legs. She said, "Someone must have spilled some water here last night." The puddle enlarged, and only I heard it as it dribbled to the floor. I agreed. I had to. I love my mother. "Yeah, it was me, Ma. Last night, when I bought the humidifier in, spilled some water over the top. Cover was loose." She stopped, turned to her right, and looked at me: "Make sure you wipe it up. I don't want to slip and fall on the way back."

Nodding my head in agreement I said, "Sure, while you're taking your shower, I'll get it mopped up." She turned away and proceeded toward the door, which was now two feet closer. She practiced a shuffle that encouraged her to remain upright without having to worry about obstacles. Left, right, and one more left. We were at the white door of the bathroom.

My mom had another good move; she grabbed the door with her left hand, pivoted away from the walker, and simultaneously grabbed the doorjamb for balance. Placing my left hand on the small of her back as support, I skillfully moved the walker out

of her way. Standing like a statue with one hand on the door and the other on the doorjamb, my mom rested. She said, "I like this shower because the water is easy to control." I knew what she meant. The hot and cold valves responded instantly to the slightest touch of the handle. It was a good set up.

With her still in the doorway, I ducked under her outstretched arm, reached in, and turned the handles. The shower was on. I asked if she had enough strength to go the last few steps. With some slight comedic relief, she said, "Well, you got Mrs. Mohammed to the mountain; she may as well bathe." I laughed. I felt better that her mood was changing, and reached in to test the water. It was hot. I asked her to test it too. She did and said it was just right for her. Again, I was happy that she was pleased.

I pulled the shower curtain open and helped my mom over the little step. Hesitating for a second, she then stepped backward over the same step. "What's wrong?" I asked. By this time I could see that she had started to fumble with the snaps of her housecoat. Her fingers were so weak that even this had become an ordeal. Taking a deep breath, I reached over and said: "Hold it closed; I'll undo the snaps."

She bunched up the material in front of her, from her chest to her waist. I quickly undid the snaps. With each snap I said: "There's number one, number two, number three, and number four; that's the last one." Owing to a fatigue I never could have imagined, she dropped her fists, which had corseted the material for those precious seconds. Her hands rested at her side and her housecoat opened. It dropped to her shoulders and she was naked. There were no white pincushions with red buttons. Not this time. Fifty years later there was me staring again and seeing something for the first time in my life. Her bellowing voice echoed louder as it bounced off the tiled bathroom, jolting me out of my rendezvous with different ages, 55 and 85. "You were in the Army; you were a professional. Let's get on with it." I stopped staring and made sure the water was still the same temperature and helped her over the little step.

Dexter Jeffries is the author of the memoir Triple Exposure: Black, Jewish, and Red in the 1950's, published in 2003 by Dafina Books, an imprint of Kensington. A professor of English at the City University of New York, and at Pratt Institute, Mr. Jeffries lives in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn.