

The Gypsy

Alyse Keller

My mother doesn't often drink. For years, she said it was because the doctors told her it was bad for her Multiple Sclerosis (MS). This was in addition to the myriad other suggestions doctors made like avoiding heat, not overexerting herself, and she may have at one point alleged the doctors told her "doing laundry" was also bad for her.

When she does drink now, it's usually with me, her most responsible and positive influence of a daughter. It is usually five small sips of sweet, sweet white wine, before her head cocks forward, mouth agape, and she's out for the night.

It was the week of Christmas and my family was gallivanting around the city ("New York is obviously the only city"-my mother). We stumbled upon a restaurant with all American cuisine and most importantly an easily accessible doorway for my mother's wheelchair. My father and I started by ordering beers from a local brewery, my sister got her usual "Dirty Shirley, hold the dirty," and in the last inning, after oscillating back and forth between a Pinot Grigio and a Pinot Grigio, my mother shocked us all with an unexpected cocktail order called "The Gypsy," a bright pink concoction of vodka and unidentified neon pink liquor.

We were 30 minutes into our dinner, my mother was about half-way through her whimsical pink drink, when she looked at my sister and me, softly whispering, "I need to go." "I need to go," is code in my family for help me to the bathroom immediately. I stood up, unlocking my mother's wheelchair, and rapidly rolled her into the bathroom with my sister in tow.

In the timeline of my mother's disease, this was probably a week after she was released from the assisted living facility for her MS relapse. A week into us learning how to properly transport her from the wheelchair to the toilet. A week into all of us getting used to the process of bringing our mother/wife to the bathroom every day. A week into showering my own mother for the first time. A week into learning how to properly wipe my own mother after she goes to the bathroom. And only 30 minutes into realizing we'd all had one drink too many.

Now let's fast forward to the moment of truth. We rolled her into the handicapped accessible stall, a stall that frankly never seems large enough or properly situated for our mother's wheelchair. As we approached the toilet, my sister and I quickly realized we were immensely under-prepared for the task at hand. But we had no choice, so we began what we'd firmly convinced ourselves would be a proper transition of our mother from the wheelchair to the toilet. In our minds we were about to begin a dance. In our minds, we were three lithe ballerinas at Lincoln Center, our mother the Swan princess in Swan Lake and us her supporting dancers. In our minds, everything seemed like it would turn out okay.

We started the normal transition. Lock the wheelchair at an angle adjacent to the toilet. Allow enough room to wiggle into the space between the toilet and the chair. Hold onto mom's waist, have her place her arms around your neck or shoulders, and lift together. Once she's standing, pull the wheelchair out from behind her to ensure she doesn't trip. Pull her pants and diaper down, rotate her 45 degrees and sit her on the seat as smoothly as physically possible.

My sister Jane had finally pulled the chair out from beneath my mother at this point, but to this day we're not sure exactly what contributed to the next series of events. It could have been the angle of the wheelchair, we might have been a little too far from the toilet seat, her legs might have been too tired by 8:30 pm that night. But what I do know wholeheartedly contributed to the next move, that goddamn Gypsy drink.

We were mid transition, and mid panic, when my mother proclaimed with gusto, "All right, are you betches gonna get me on this toilet or what?"

Neither my sister nor I had heard our mother speak that way before. I'm fairly certain my mother had never heard herself speak that way before. So before we knew it, my mother was laughing, I was laughing, and Jane was laughing. As the laughter grew, so did our inability to support our mother, or for her to support herself. And so, she started to sink to the floor-- a very dirty, dirty Manhattan bathroom floor, mind you. And there was nothing we could do. The ship was sinking, and we were going down with it. But that's not all. Not only did her laughing fit weaken her ability to stand, it also prompted her bladder to run loose like old faithful.

So there we were, three gals out on the town, sprawled on a bathroom floor surrounded by our mother's urine. If you too have ever been stranded on a bathroom floor with your mother and her urine, you know that it's a funky position to be in.

I started, "Mom, I'm really sorry about this, but I guess there is no better time to tell you, both Jane and I have also been stranded on bathroom floors during college, surrounded by our own liquids."

Jane chimed in, "Yeah, mom if it makes you feel any better, we've all been there... especially, Alice."

My mother sarcastically chimes in, "Ah, you girls clearly know how to make a mother proud."

She takes a deep breath and says, "Okay, I think I'm ready to get up, please."

So, like a NASCAR support crew, my sister and I started to work our mother back on to her wheelchair. My sister took her upper body from behind, and I took her upper body in the front. We pulled her up, our pee-soaked clothes sloshing between us. We cleaned what we could off the floor and our mother, and looked at each other with sheer pride.

Luckily for us, none of the people that entered the bathroom while we were sprawled on the floor asked if we needed help, so we didn't have to deal with others inquiring why three grown women were relaxing on a bathroom floor. This New York scenario was apparently not out of the ordinary.

When we returned to the table, all three of us giggling, my father who had been waiting a while for us to return, smiled and said, "I won't ask." We gathered up our belongings, my mother completely silent up until this point. And as we rolled out of the restaurant, my mother motioned for us to pause, and laughing at herself dramatically stated, "Okay, so who's ready for round two?"

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