

IN THE MIDDLE by Carin Fahr Shulusky

EXCERPT

By this time, Mom was mobile enough to get to the doctor, or at least so the insurance company determined. This meant we could no longer get home visits doctors. paid by insurance, so Maria, John, and I had to find a way to get Mom through the gauntlet of

Each organ of Mom's body had its own doctor: cardiologist, neurologist, urologist, gynecologist, optometrist, dermatologist, podiatrist, and dentist. Everything was failing and in need of repair. I actually think we could take Mom to a different doctor every day of the week. As it was, we managed the most urgent needs and hoped for the best with the rest. Maria took Mom to the cardiologist, who was managing her medications and needed to take regular blood levels. I took Mom to the urologist because she was having urinary tract troubles, possibly caused by the medications prescribed by the cardiologist. John took Mom to the physical therapist, who could also no longer make home visits on insurance. Physical therapy was prescribed by the cardiologist to help her get more mobile.

Each trip out required us to call her multiple times to remind her of the appointment, then we had to arrive nearly an hour early because she would invariably not be ready. Getting Mom ready for a doctor visit required finding clean clothes, inserting hearing aids, and getting her false teeth in place—and making sure she made a bathroom visit. Before leaving we would have to locate her insurance card, her checkbook, her purse, scarf, and coat.

I'd pull my car up to her front porch through the lawn so Mom would have the least number of steps from house to car. Getting into the car was difficult to the extreme. Once I had Mom in the car, I'd load her walker and cane in the trunk.

When we got to the doctor, we would have to reverse the process: get the walker out of the trunk and Mom in the door and find a place for her to sit while I parked the car. I'd run back in before Mom decided to try to find her own way up the elevator to the doctor's office or some thoughtful person decided to help and I'd lose her.

I thought it would be easier when we were finally in the doctor's office until the nurse said she'd need a urine sample and handed Mom a cup. The idea of this eighty-two-year-old lady, who could hardly use the toilet herself and missed it most of the time, managing to actually get urine in a cup was

so ludicrous I just burst out laughing. The nurse was not amused. She gave me an incriminating look, put the cup back and held up a “hat” that fit over the whole toilet seat. Still chuckling despite my best efforts to stop, I shook my head in agreement and lead Mom to the bathroom. The rest of the visit went fairly normal.

Before I could go in with my mom, the nurse had to ask her if it was okay that this person—me—could come into the exam room. Mom looked puzzled. The nurse muttered something about privacy laws and we went in. No one noticed that I was holding my breath. I was terrified that Mom would say no.

No one knew what would come out of her mouth next. If I didn’t go in, the doctor would surely get incorrect information and whatever the doctor told Mom would be lost. She could hardly remember having a doctor visit, much less what he said. But I couldn’t argue the point. What was I supposed to say? *Hey guys, she’s half crazy. Why are you asking her?* Not only would that get me nowhere, it would hurt Mom’s feelings. Whoever proposed the privacy laws surely doesn’t have aging parents. Fortunately, she said yes, so I could enter.

The doctor discussed why she was having frequent urinary tract infections, which I’m sure went right over her head. Then he said, “We should see you back next month.”

I want to shout, *No, please no*, but I said, “Is it necessary? I have to take a day off work to get her here,” I pleaded.

Mom caught that too well and said, “I’m sure Maria will be glad to bring me.”

Now, the thing I was trying so hard to avoid was out. I made a great effort to hide from Mom my frustration and anxiety over losing a day’s work. I didn’t want her to think my work was more important than her. I didn’t want to think that either, but there it was, always under the surface, in the deep dark places of my ambition.

I had taken a half day off, left at noon, and didn’t plan to return to work. My boss would never understand this.

Shopping with Mom on the Internet didn’t work out too well. Visualizing an item in one dimension just wasn’t working for her, so I thought we would try the old fashion way. I knew Mom wanted to go to Penney’s so I thought we would start there. I told Mom the mall had wheelchairs we could borrow, but she was so negative on that idea that I quickly let it drop. Even with Mom’s handicap parking pass, we couldn’t get close enough to the store, so I pulled right in front, got the walker from my trunk, and helped her in the store. It would have worked well if the store had any place to sit, but there was nothing.

I told Mom to go on in the store and I'd catch up with her. By the time I had parked and caught up, she had already found two items she wanted: one for Maria and one for Katie. She next wanted to buy John a pair of shoes, so I helped her to the shoe department and she quickly found a pair of work shoes that she wanted. I made sure we had all the receipts tucked neatly in her purse. She wanted to find a new blouse for Christmas, so we made our way to an elevator and up to the next floor. She walked a small way and suddenly stopped.

"I don't think I can go any further," Mom said. "I'm just worn out."

I knew this was a stretch, but I was hopeful. I asked the sales lady if there were any chairs in the store. To my surprise, she found a folding chair from the storeroom and brought it out for Mom. While Mom rested comfortably—more or less—in the chair, I brought her several styles and colors of shirts. She picked one and I purchased it for her.

"We could go to another store if you would let me get a wheelchair," I offered.

"No," she said firmly. "It's not time for a wheelchair yet. I'll get Maria to take me another day. I think I need to go home."

On the way home, we passed our favorite soft-serve ice cream store.

"How about an ice cream cone?" I asked.

"That sounds lovely," Mom said. We could always agree on ice cream. We had a wonderful time eating our ice cream. I suppose I inherited my passion for the stuff from Mom. With the happy ice-cream high, we parted cheerfully. I carried all her purchases to her bedroom as directed and promised to return to help with Christmas decoration.