

EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES

Catherine Elcik

Worried Daughter • Unqualified Caretaker • Derelict

OBJECTIVE: *To survive the many roles an adult child of a father with Alzheimer's must play*

WORK EXPERIENCE

MEDIA CRITIC

March 2015 – present

- Called bullshit on the relatively utopian snapshot of Alzheimer's pedaled by a PSA-style commercial in which a sweet old lady misplaces her keys in the freezer
- Scoffed at a video dramatization of a family having “the driving talk” that followed a neat script to a neat resolution but offered zero guidance on best practices should your six-foot-four dad lunge at you when you try to take his keys

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZER

March 2015 – present

- Excavated a room packed with paperwork stuffed into boxes with no discernible pattern by sorting through it all piece by piece, throwing away most of it, and filing the rest
- Liberated car title from between printouts of spam email and an inappropriate sexual cartoon
- Collated most-interesting cases from dad's four-decade career in real estate assessment, including a transcript of a deposition he'd provided at trial that read like an archaeological record of the verbal fluency he'd lost

FINANCIAL PLANNER*April 2015 – present*

- Became durable power of attorney for a man whose math prowess had once been a parlor trick—at a party decades and decades ago, one of dad’s friends had rattled off numbers, another had punched them into a calculator, and they’d both cheered when dad’s mental sum matched the one on the calculator
- Arranged consolidation loan for credit card debt run up after dad decided the monthly bill was the company’s attempt to scam him into paying a second time for goods and services that he was convinced he’d already paid for with every swipe of his card
- Cried upon realizing that paying for the memory care that dad would likely need one day might have been possible if he hadn’t made the (clearly cognitively compromised) decision to sell all the stock in his 401(k) after the 2008 market crash, thus solidifying his losses
- Helped mom pursue death benefits from dad’s small life-insurance policies and transform joint bank accounts into one lonely individual account

CHAUFFEUR*June 2015 – January 2017*

- Drove parents or arranged for others to drive parents to doctor’s appointments, the pharmacy, the hair salon, the grocery store, and—on occasion—the creamery with the good ice cream

SEX ED TEACHER*July 2003 – present*

- Assured dad that his prostate cancer could not be passed to mom during intercourse
- Disabused mom of her hope that she’d caught genital warts from a public toilet
- Confirmed that mom understood she was at liberty to refuse advances when it was clear she was visibly shaken by dad’s request to refill a Viagra prescription during a doctor’s appointment in which he couldn’t correctly name the current year

MEDICAL ADVOCATE*July 1989 – present*

- Tore father’s PCP a new one for green-lighting a refill of Viagra without considering how a six-foot-four man who couldn’t accurately state the year could possibly be trusted to understand consent
- At age fourteen, diagnosed dad’s insatiable thirst during a family vacation as a warning sign of the diabetes he wouldn’t get diagnosed until his vision blurred while driving months later
- At age twenty, consulted with mom’s psychiatrist during mom’s nervous

breakdown and tried to explain mom's lack of rational action to a father who gave no indication that he believed in either mental illness or mental health care

- At age forty, flagged behaviors that indicated mom might be spiraling toward a second nervous breakdown, then coordinated the medical team in charge of the emergency pharmacological recalibration to prevent said breakdown
- Upon realizing mom's doctor was ignoring her worries about dad's cognitive decline—either because mom's anxiety had inspired a history of crying wolf or because she wasn't painting a clear enough before-and-after picture—penned a letter comparing dad's previous party-trick-level math ability to his current inability to play a math-based card game he'd taught me to play when I was six years old
- Demanded referral to a geriatric psychiatrist when dad flew into rages regarding revocation of driving privileges
- Translated the cardiologist's conclusion that dad went into cardiac arrest as a result of ventricular tachycardia (a short-circuit of the heart) and the prognosis was grim (he was only alive because the machines were breathing for him)
- Gently repeated prognosis until mom fully understood that dad wouldn't wake up
- Flagged down the medical team and communicated that our family was ready to turn off the bank of machines hooked up to dad

DOMESTIC SPY

March 2015 – present

- Replaced actual car key with a copy that slid into the ignition but failed to turn
- Received unsolicited intel from a confidential informant that during at least one of the long walks dad took, which regularly left mom at home in a panic, he actually climbed into a car waiting for him around the corner
- Destroyed evidence of dad's affair, including printed email correspondence, photos, and a plastic grocery sack full of unused condoms buried in the boxes of papers

COMPLETE MORON

April 1975 – present

- Took an unreasonably long time to realize that dad likely wasn't filling the Viagra for sexy fun times with mom
- At any given time stubbornly clung to one of three theories that dad's infidelity was a result of
 - Alzheimer's-related impulsivity changes;
 - the stress of being married to a woman riddled with anxiety; or
 - generalized asshattery.

THERAPIST*June 1997 – present*

- Regularly talked mom down from the grip of anxiety and depression
- Helped mom brainstorm ways to feel more plugged in to life
- Resigned self to the fact that mom's mental health issues—despite decades spent aspiring to wellness—may leave her permanently unplugged
- By confessing my own relief, reassured mom that the relief that she felt about losing dad before he entered end-stage Alzheimer's was not sinful but human

RELOCATION SPECIALIST*August 2016 – January 2017*

- Toured assisted living facility in the town where I currently live
- Rejected the financial burden of assisted living
- Was reluctant to entertain sister's desire to move our parents closer to her
- Toggled between crushing guilt and soaring hope at the idea of transferring day-to-day care to sister
- Dropped parents off with friends and teamed up with husband, sister, and brother-in-law to truck mom and dad's belongings to new home near sister, unpacked and set up said new home, and settled mom and dad in that same night

REAL ESTATE AGENT*January 2017 – July 2017*

- Arranged pre-sale home inspection to identify issues with the house where I grew up
- Hired numerous home repair professionals to address priority issues flagged in said inspection, including a trash removal company that:
 - removed all the detritus left after the move except cleaning supplies, old paint, and my shame at not noticing the house had gotten so run down
 - allowed me to join in as they kicked apart particleboard bookcases that once held my treasured Stephen King and Trixie Belden novels
 - ignored me when I slunk out of the room a few seconds later upon realizing my kicking catharsis felt an awful lot like dancing on the carcass of my childhood home

AWOL RESERVIST*July 2017 – present*

- Fled to vacation in Scotland with husband after finalizing sale of the home where I grew up
- Returned home to a new world order:
 - My sister on the front lines day-to-day
 - Me in an off-site bunker radioing in advice about finances

TUNING FORK

August 2017–present

- Discovered that the longer the period between visits, the more my own brain serves as a tuning fork to my mom’s brain, her anxiety inspiring my own to hum brazenly

GENERALIZED ASSHAT

April 1975–present

- Persistently conflated mom and dad with their diseases
- Relieved to lose dad while he still knew who I was even though millions of other Alzheimer’s families aren’t as lucky
- Dragged feet on an increasing number of familial responsibilities
- Betrayed mom and dad in service to this experimental hermit crab essay

PEER ADVISOR

February 2015–present

- Advises those with one or more healthy parents to take precautionary action
- Find and read a copy of Atul Gawande’s *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* now
- Like, right now
- Trust me, you do *not* want to be reading this book for the first time in a crisis
- Seriously, when your dad comes through a round of radiation for prostate cancer and it occurs to you that even though you’re the compass for your family you have no idea how your dad organizes his retirement savings, bank accounts, and legal documents, make a case for being initiated into the inner circle of his affairs, *now*
- Don’t let him laugh away your concerns
- Don’t let him squirm out of it
- Don’t let him push you off until some undefined later
- Because there might not be a later
- Not a later that’s worth a damn, anyway ■

CATHERINE ELCIK is a writer and tutor in Winthrop, Massachusetts, who usually writes fiction about misfits and subcultures. She holds a BA in journalism from Northeastern University and an MA in creative writing from Boston University. Currently, she’s querying agents for her first novel and arm-wrestling with her second.