

A Story of Names

My son was born, my first child. I called him Joseph. Joseph was the name of my mother's brother, the one who died when he was nine. What was it that Joseph had died of? It was one of those things that killed children in those days. Pneumonia, perhaps? Or scarlet fever? One of those things that usually doesn't kill children any more. Anyway I thought it would please my Mom to have our son named after Joseph, and it did. Now Joseph is almost seven, and my Mom doesn't know his name anymore.

She hasn't seemed quite right for a few years—forgetful. Odd. She says things that don't make sense. But her behaviour has become more and more strange since Joseph was born. The summer he was a baby we went to the cottage with Mom and Dad for a weekend. Joseph slept in a portable crib in the back room, where Fred and I slept too. It was the middle of the night, and we were sleeping soundly. Mom burst through the door from the kitchen. She was frantic. "I have to find those children! I need to take care of them! They are calling for me!" There she was in her nightgown, in the dark of the cottage night, hysterical about some children. Joseph woke up and started to cry. What children was she talking about? Her younger siblings? My siblings? Children who didn't exist?

It was terrible to observe what was happening to Mom. Incidents like the one that night at the cottage began to happen regularly. I remember one Sunday afternoon when Mom and Dad came to visit us in Guelph. Mom always drove the car because Dad had lost his vision several years earlier. They got lost, and by the time they arrived, Mom was in a desperate state. Even when they were there and she saw me she still wasn't sure she had come to the right place. We live in a condominium called "Guelph Villa." She got out of the car and walked with me to our front door, lamenting over and over again, "Where is the Guelph

Villa? I just can't find it!" She didn't realize she had found it.

It took many months, but all of us finally admitted that something had to be done. This knowledge came slowly over time. Alzheimer's disease is like that—it creeps toward you, and then one day you realize it has stolen your mother from you before you've had time to say goodbye or to thank her for being such a great Mom.

I remember the day my eldest sister Mimi called. She is a nurse, and the oldest, so she does a lot of the hard things. She told me there was a room available for Mom in a nursing home. There I was with a two-year-old and another infant, Samuel, named after his great-grandfather, and my Mom was being moved to an Alzheimer's ward at a nursing home. My friends had mothers who took their kids to the zoo and to Disney World. I had a mother who didn't know that Sam was her grandson. She had forgotten Joseph's name. She had forgotten my name too, even though she chose it herself.

