

Lunch with the Girls



(L-R) Ann Orling Silverman, Esther Wexler Hoffer, the author, and Terry Wexler Hershkowitz.

by LESLIE HOLLIS MARGULIES

My mother called me up on Saturday and said, "come over, Ann and Alex are here." I knew she was expecting her younger sister Terry. "You mean Terry and Leo, Mom." "No, it's Ann and Alex." "Are Terry and Leo there too?" Long pause. "No, I don't think so, wait a minute I'll get someone." "Someone," turned out to be Ann, my mother's best friend for sixty years. Ann explained that indeed Terry and Leo were there and they all came in one car. So it seemed my mother was half right.

Half right is pretty good these days. My mother has Alzheimer's and our conversations often have a bizarre nonsensical quality, guessing games really. She starts a sentence, I finish it. She loses something, we make a game of finding it. For a person who has always hated games I'm getting pretty good at this. It's not that I'm getting used to it. But maybe I actually am.

In some ways it's so much easier to "hang" (as my daughters say) with my mother. She's so much more open. One interesting facet of Alzheimer's is that a person's old defenses seem to vanish. Hence, my mother laughs louder, hugs harder and cries more easily. This is not the mother I grew up with, but a much freer uninhibited version.

I wonder if that adage, "Watch out what you wish for, or you might get it" has somehow come true? It hasn't really. I wished for a mother less frustrated and angry. I wished for a mother more open to me, less worried about pleasing my father. I wished for a mother who would hug me as often as I wanted, and now I have that. How very strange. It's hard to get angry at my mother these days. But I am so very very angry.

The younger of my two children has just left for college. I am proud of my children but I am officially empty-nested. I recently discovered that my favorite tree, a stately eighty year old Copper Beech tree in my front yard is dying. I turn forty-five in a few months. Oh yes, and I'm losing my mother in pieces.

But I was reminded of something very important the afternoon my mother's sister and her friend came to visit. With all these feelings of loss coming from so many directions I can still rediscover new things about my family. Good things. Funny things.

I had forgotten how funny these women were. They spent the afternoon with my mother reminiscing about their teenage years, and about the months they lived down south before their husbands went overseas in World War II. The men present listened quietly as did I. This was not my history but theirs.

Terry talked about life in a small town in Tennessee where Leo was stationed for a time. It seemed her fellow workers couldn't place

the name Terry Hershkowitz. They tried and tried to get her to tell her religion and when the pressure became too great my Aunt Terry spoke up. My people are called Galicians. For a time it seemed that worked. Those small town folk thought it was some exotic religion. We howled. My mother laughed the loudest.

Ann told about working in a government psychiatric hospital during the war. She related that as a secretary she took shorthand for a psychiatrist. On each patient's medical record she was instructed to write "Jew" where appropriate and "nigger" where appropriate.

Ann went on to say that she eventually got even (at least in some small way) with her boss. When some German POW's were being treated at that same hospital she asked in her most concerned and respectful way whether or not she should write "Nazi" on the medical forms of the German patients. Her boss got the message. He turned, according to Ann, a pleasing shade of crimson.

They also reminded my mother that when she was a young girl looking for work she didn't always call herself Esther Wexler (too Jewish sounding). Instead she took her brother Gilbert's name and her twin sister Dorothy's name. So my mother Esther looked for work as Dorothy Gilbert. Again, everyone laughed, especially my mother. Distant history is much more familiar than today's date or whose voice is on the phone. At some point Ann said, "it's hard growing up." Terry responded with "it's hard growing old."

I often look for humor at the most painful of times. Maybe I learned that from these people. As a child I needed the company of adults. I always stayed close. I loved the reportage, the lively way they interpreted the world. I loved the laughing, the inside jokes, the energy.

When Ann and Terry were leaving, my mother asked how they were getting home. Ann said, "I'm going in Terry's car, I'm no flat-leaver." This I was told was an old junior high expression which my mother remembered well. *Flat-leaver*- to leave someone flat.

I came away from that visit with such a wonderful feeling of belonging. I'm losing my mother in pieces and sometimes the pain seems more than I can bear. As much as I'd like to hide, to run away, I can't. I'm no flat-leaver. But please, does anybody know a good joke or story? I'm saving them up. I'll need them down the road.

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