

Kaddish

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When my mother Midge got Alzheimer's Disease at the age of fifty-three, my rabbi taught me the prayer that Moses said to God when God struck his sister Miriam with leprosy: *El na refah na la*—Heal her, Lord, please heal her. I said the prayer on and off for the next seven years even though there was no possibility of healing. When I went to synagogue I listened to others recite the mourner's kaddish, a prayer that is said on the day a loved one dies and every day after that for eleven months. I wished I had a prayer that was meant exactly for me, but I never found one for a parent who is terminally ill.

At first my mother fought hard against the disease, with a resilience that was as much a part of her as her tall, strong body, her potent sparking anger and bitter sense of humour. But soon she could no longer remember or understand dates, or comprehend the passage of time, so my age and birthday became a mystery to her. She stopped saying my name. She lost the concept of mother and daughter. She asked me who I was. She did not respond at all when I entered the room. These were all deaths, weren't they? Or one long, slow death. Imagine if there was a prayer for every stage in a long death.

My father and my sister and I helped her bathe and dress. And then we started going into the bathroom with her, pulling down her pants, helping her onto the toilet, wiping her. We stripped the sheets and bathed her after she wet the bed, we wiped her nose, we cleaned food from her chin. She wandered the house blank-faced, humming. After seven years of illness she died.

I said kaddish every day for eleven months. I thought back to the time when I had longed for a prayer like the kaddish, created especially for my situation. But something about it didn't fit. The prayer praises God, but I was mad at him a lot of the time, and my mother never believed in Him anyway.

Allen Ginsberg's poem "Kaddish" was written in honour of his mother, Naomi, after he learned that no one had said kaddish at her funeral. Naomi died in a psychiatric hospital after years of suffering from mental illness. In the poem, Ginsberg remembers his mother not as the woman she was before she got sick, but as she was in illness:

Blessed be you Naomi in tears! Blessed be you Naomi in
fears!

Blessed Blessed Blessed in sickness!

...

Blest be your last years' loneliness!

Blest be your failure! Blest be your stroke! Blest be the
close of your eye! Blest be the gaunt of your cheek!

Blest be your withered thighs!

When I think of my mother I remember the hairs under her chin and the thin scar at the base of her spine and the ripples of varicose veins on her thighs and her dry peeling feet. The thick blue veins on her hands, her large ears, her bitten nails. The things that I was never supposed to know so intimately. Now I miss the mother I tucked into bed, the mother I bathed and dressed and fed as if she were my child. "Blessed be you Midge in confusion!" I say to her. "Blessed be you Midge in shame! Blest be your last years' nakedness! Blest be your forgetting! Blest be your memory!"

Sarah Leavitt contributes regularly to *Geist* and writes a monthly column for *Xtra West* in Vancouver. She has created short documentaries for CBC Radio and written articles for the *Globe and Mail* and *Vancouver Review*. She is working on a graphic novel.