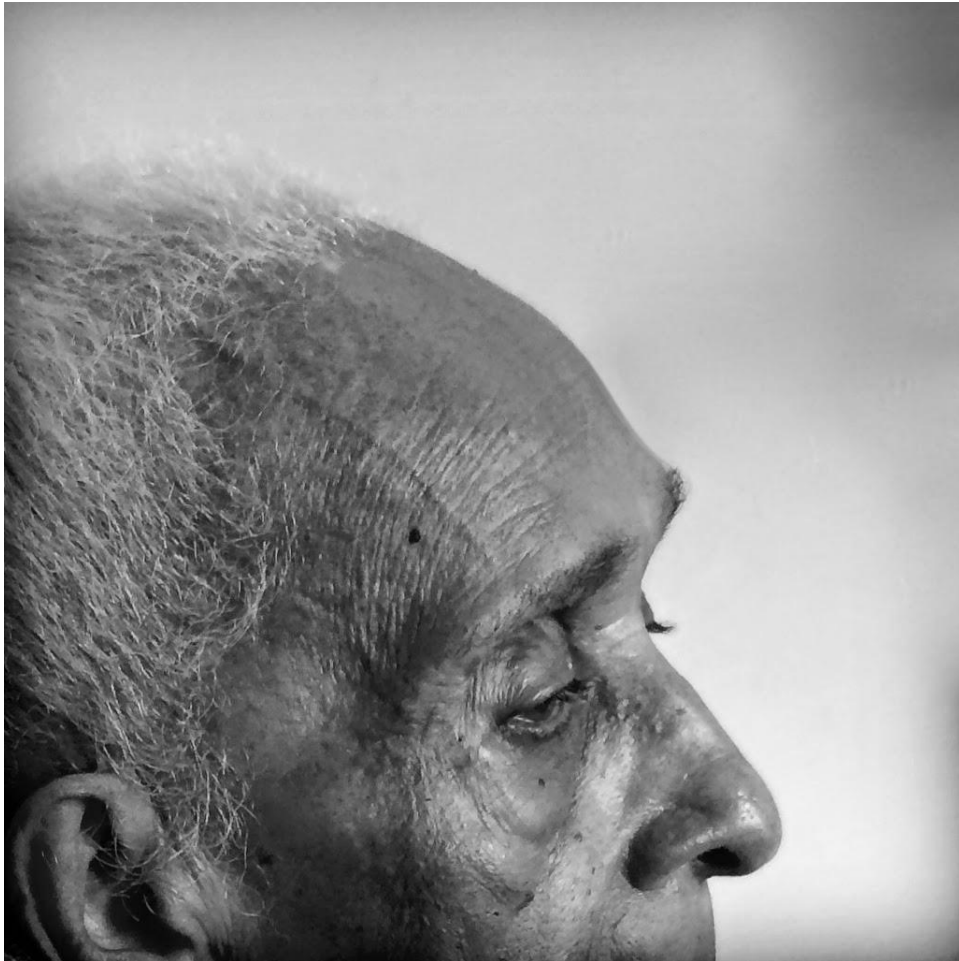


**Wishing**  
**By Rosemarie Robotham**





# 1.

Mom is markedly more fragile than when I was here a month ago. Her dementia has deepened, so that now she wants to get out of her chair and do things, like making sure the ads get into the newspaper or taking the children to the beach. Friends from her school days who have long passed on visit her sometimes, and she takes uncomplicated pleasure in their appearance. Her thin arms tremble continuously, and her fingers, though still beautifully manicured, are twisted with arthritis, the knuckles swollen, the joints stiff, the ligaments like worn-out rubber bands. It is hard to see how confined she is now, but my brother and his wife have provided for her; the three women who rotate weekly are patient and kind, and they know how to distract our mother when she gets stuck in a thought loop, which is probably just a more extreme version of the way my own brain works, not a comforting thought at all.

Sleeping with my mom this time, I feel the bed quiver all night, her hands jittering endlessly, electrical currents coursing through, her legs making small continuous kicks, her whole body humming. I lie face to face with her and gently cover her hands with my own. Slowly the current traveling through them simmers, and her hands alight on the sheet like crooked birds, the tremor just a hint now as her breath deepens, as dreams take hold. I barely sleep, aware of the constant pulsing of current through her body. This is completely new. If I lift my hands from hers, her arms rise stiffly of their own accord, the

fingers askew, and still she sleeps, hands fluttering.

"Just be there," my husband says on the phone when I describe this new state of things to him. "Don't worry about next. Just be there now."

Yesterday, I was distressed, still getting used to the newest incursions of age, not close to being at peace with the fact that I can do nothing to arrest the march. Today feels different, each minute a new blessing. I feel a deep sense of gratitude that I can be here with her, sitting with no agenda, talking sometimes, silent sometimes, massaging lotion into her hands, helping them loosen, open, and playing praise songs she loves on the tiny Bluetooth speaker that belongs to my son. He wanted me to take it so that I could play music for his grandmother with pure rich tones.

She sits in her recliner listening, tears at the corners of her eyes.

I don't want to make you cry, I tell her.

She waves a hand, unable right then to form the words she wants.

Are you crying from sadness or from the music? I ask.

Joy, she says. The pure beauty of it. This is what I needed.

Well, cry then, I say.



## 2.

It is my last day already. I fly back to New York tomorrow. It's been a good week and a hard one. Best of all were the days reading to my mom, watching *Jeopardy* with her, listening to music, our conversation rambling. Hardest of all were the nights in the bed beside her. My mom was most agitated in the dark, her mind slipping its bounds and roaming freely through visions as real to her as anything. One night she called for someone to help her with a tray: "Come and hold this, sweetheart; my hands are tired. Okay, set it over there." She spoke tenderly, the way she did to her grandchildren when they were younger and helping her set up for one of her famous tea parties with the good china and silver tea service. I imagined a platter laden with the finger sandwiches of grated cheddar and thinly sliced cucumber, all the crusts trimmed, delicate triangles artfully arranged. It made me happier to imagine she was holding an elegant tea party in her dreams. She was so in her element at such times.

But it was not all lovely tea parties. Mom could be all business in the night, talking for hours about a letter sent by her sister Maisy, and please could I get it down from the shelf because she had to attend to its contents. It was useless to tell her there was no letter, and that her sister Maisy had died a year ago in Virginia. Mom would get annoyed and ever more insistent, and at last I just lay silent beside her, unsure what else to do. Her speech was crystal clear during these business imperatives, the muscles of her jaw and tongue snapping to, the memory of her days of managing everything with supreme efficiency conquering the neurological and nervous system impairments.

I hardly slept. Sometimes I went downstairs and sat for an hour in the study, praying that when I went back in she would be asleep. But always, as soon as I touched the bed, her eyes flew open, and the instructions would begin again.

This morning, she wakes and asks me to call my brother and his best friend, Leslie, both of them doctors who had attended medical school together. Leslie lived with us when we were growing up, and he is like another son to my mom.

She says, "Call the boys; I didn't realize I was having the operation this morning."

"What operation?" I mumble, barely awake. "You're not having an operation."

"Of course I am. I already had it."

She is so certain I say nothing.

After breakfast Mom settles back in her recliner and gazes out at the hills, dozing in and out all morning. She asks about two of her sisters, if they are still with us. I tell her yes, but they aren't able to travel anymore, or talk on the phone, and Beulah is having memory problems. That's why she hasn't seen or heard them. Only Grace is still able to travel, and she will be coming to visit next week. My mother nods, and says, "I seem to have put the other two on the wrong list," meaning her running tally of who's already passed on. I think nothing more of her comment about the operation until my brother arrives home at lunchtime to bid me safe travels. As he and I sit next to our mother, the

three of us chatting, she says to him, "Why didn't you tell me about the operation?" My brother pauses, looks at me, and decides to let it pass.

I sit quietly, wishing, imagining some sort of spirit operation while she slept, one that will liberate her of pain, soothe the currents streaming through her body, and ease the loneliness of my leaving her yet again. Oh, she has been a wondrous mother, and it is not just longing and loss that makes me say this. I remember suddenly something a friend who is a geriatric nurse told me recently. I had mentioned that reality had become fluid to my mother, and she said, "Dementia can be heartbreaking for the family but delicately soft for the person who has it, just a gentle letting go of all the pain and sorrow of the world."

I pull the words around me now like a cloak of comfort as I reach for my mother's hand. I uncurl her fist and nestle my hand in her palm. She smiles. It is a meditation. I quiet my incessant wishing so that I can just be here with her as my husband says.

*Just be here now, I think. Just be.*