

A DAUGHTER'S View

It all started with the tragic suicide of my brother in August 2005.

They say it is a parent's worst nightmare to have a child die, but to have a sibling take his own life and live with the aftermath is a daughter's worst reality.

I don't profess to know the brain's mechanism in dealing with extreme grief, but the effects were almost immediate. Within the span of a year, my mother went from a vibrant beauty to someone who didn't remember to bathe.

The worst was what I call the "in between stage," where she would "come to" and look at me and ask "What's the matter with my brain?" This, by far, was the most painful.

Seconds seemed like hours until my mother would relapse again, this time for a longer period. Horrible as it seems, I wanted her to relapse because when she came to lucidity, it was excruciating to see the grief in her eyes.

Well, I got my wish.

I must say that this stage—Mother is in a beautiful care home in Whistler—is by far the easiest on me, as well as on her. She doesn't remember my little brother at all and is getting to the stage where she doesn't remember me, either.

She thinks I'm every dark-haired girl on every magazine cover, which is



Vacationing in Edinburgh

quite the compliment, and thus steals all the residents' magazines with dark-haired girls on the cover.

As a teenager, I had promised to take my mother back to Scotland one day. I knew last year that if I didn't jump on the opportunity quickly, that day would be lost forever.

Within the span of a year, my mother went from a vibrant beauty to someone who didn't remember to bathe.

I found it astonishing that while we were in Edinburgh, my "old mom" came back!

She kept up with me as we walked and she didn't tire. We had the time of our lives. She virtually had no relapses.

Once our fantastic journey was over and we were back in Vancouver, within days my mother returned to her former state—only worse than ever. She didn't know where she lived and why she was where she was. Her condition started to decline rapidly. The sudden change to her schedule and routine may have caused this.

My family and I hired a good friend of ours, Frank, to be her caregiver. He was my friend for 30 years and was truly a God-send in this situation. At least I could return to Victoria with some piece of mind.

On one of my last visits to her apartment, I took my mother out for dinner. Because she used to be a beauty queen and now wasn't even bothering to comb her hair, I decided to make her look like her former self. I did her makeup and her hair. She took a look in the mirror and, lo and behold, my mom came "out" again!

We had a wonderful dinner. The waiters attended to her like bees to honey. I had to wonder whether the visual cue in the mirror had brought her back.

The next morning she didn't even remember going out.

Dealing with Alzheimer's has been such a learning experience for me. I am still astounded by the way the brain "compartmentalizes" information and how my mother remembers our trip to Scotland as if it were yesterday, yet doesn't remember that she has a daughter. ▲