Spirituality



"Visitation," circa 1433-34 painting by Fra Angelico (Wikimedia Commons/Sailko)



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I could never tally the number of Hail Marys I've whispered in my life, the thousands of times I've spoken the words of Elizabeth to Mary at the Visitation: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." Her words have carved out a smooth, well-worn path I can walk to God. Even still, I didn't expect that Visit, and the imaging of it by the painter Fra Angelico, would cradle my mother and I through her dementia when she would no longer know me as her daughter.

As her disease progresses, I have prayed for acceptance of the fact that my mother no longer recognizes me. Sometimes that acceptance comes. But because I have been part of my mother since my own conception, because she once carried me like Mary held Jesus within her tabernacle, I still have sudden, unpredictable moments of grief. I am a grown woman, but something inside still cries out, "Mama!"

My mother lives three hours away in a seaside town in Maine, nestled in a cottage where she receives full-time care. During a recent weekend visit, I carefully followed the weather reports for my return trip Monday morning. A destructive storm was predicted to cover the route. Hour by hour, the warning remained the same: Sixty-mile-an hour gusts were headed our way.

The forecast was correct. Rain battered the windows as my mother anxiously bit her nails and stared at the pines and birches that bent and arched in the winds.

As is typical of those with dementia and Alzheimer's, my mother suffers from sundowning, becoming agitated as light drains and shadows grow. That day was one long, excruciating sundown for her, an opaque gray that had no exit. She repeatedly gestured with her hands upon her head, panicking, "Everything is just too close and I can't get out of it."

I felt this too, stranded there. It was a grueling day for all. I took breaks in her guest room, both comforting and strengthening myself by listening to the song "Christ Be Our Light" repeatedly on my phone. I drank way too much coffee and put myself even more on edge.

> *In deepest night, shadows are lifted ...*
> *Christ be our light, shine in our hearts, shine in the darkness.*

That night, drained but grateful that the skies had finally calmed, we prepared for bed. My mother, grasping the door frame without her cane, entered the powder

room in her flannel nightgown.

"Are you staying over?" she asked eagerly.

Surprised, I turned to her with soap all over my face. "Yes."

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She put down the lid of the toilet to make a seat for herself. "Oh good!" Genuinely curious, she asked, "But why are you here?"

"I came to visit you."

"Oh! Thank you!" Her sincerity was childlike. "But why?"

"Well, because that's what daughters do. They visit their moms."

She looked around, baffled. "You're my child?"

"Yes. I'm your daughter." I took the washcloth and rubbed it all over my face, rinsed it in hot water.

"I'm — I'm so confused." With the purest expression, she apologized. "I'm really sorry I didn't know you were my child."

"It's OK, Mom. You don't have to apologize for that."

Though we both wear eyeglasses, we were without them then. We were two women looking at one another, bare-faced and vulnerable. Perhaps, somewhere inside, she knew she had given birth to me, that I once dwelled within her. But it didn't matter. The image of the Fra Angelico painting "Visitation" filled me.

My mother had come to bid goodnight not because I was her offspring, but because we all seek light — stars, moon, fireflies, the logs in the fireplace. She felt it then. Light. Love. Me, carrying the rays of love within me. Like Mary carried Jesus. Like Elizabeth carried John. Like she had carried me.

Women can be aunts, cousins, wives, daughters, sister-in-laws, mothers, friends, neighbors. But that night, it no longer mattered how our relationship was defined; we were Elizabeth and Mary, arms reaching toward one another and overlapping,

equals in a matching embrace. It felt peaceful, entering the place of this new word to describe us: We were simply kinswomen.

I suppose it would appear unexpected that, neither of us pregnant, neither of us even having wombs anymore, we would be brought closer to the joyful mystery of the Visitation. But beyond recognition and lost memories, my mother and I turned toward one another with light on a dark winter night. Because even when women are emptied, the fullness of God's love still comes.