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# WEEKEND BREAK



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# A MYTH UNRAVELS

## MUM IS NOT INDESTRUCTIBLE

By **PATRICK WEBB**  
 For *The Daily Astorian*

**S**URREY, England — Those quizzes are captivating. Pick one word to describe . . .

As we said our goodbyes, I applied that to my Mum.

“Indestructible.”

Maybe, once. But today my word is so obviously a lie.

For a lifetime sportswoman looking to downsize when macular degeneration robbed her of her sight, Mum’s move from a three-bedroom home to a miniscule apartment was a home run.

Never in three years had she lamented the loss of her two-story brick castle packed with 62 years of memories and an attic filled with every “handy” box the mailman delivered.

Besides, it is not home anymore. A charming young couple with a new baby and a Staffordshire bull terrier have knocked down the kitchen wall to make it open plan.



Patrick Webb

**May Webb, pictured with late husband Bill in 2009, was a sportswoman all her adult life, playing tennis, badminton and lawn bowls. Participation in sports pervades her family. Bill played soccer, cricket, tennis and bowls. One son was a soccer goalkeeper and another a referee for three decades. Her late brother was a champion target shooter and cyclist; a nephew and granddaughter run marathons.**

### Assisted living

Instead, Mum thrived in assisted living, a studio apartment half the size of a volleyball court. It had everything a frail nonagenarian with bad eyesight needed, a sideboard bursting with birthday cards, inky pens and sticky address labels, a college-dorm sized fridge, and a shorter step from bed or chair to loo. Independence, but the daily company of like seniors at a hot communal lunch.

That came to a bumpy halt after Thanksgiving. Two night-time falls left blood on the soft red carpet. Two hospital stays concluded with an admonition: Two strikes and you’re out.

She could not return home.

Next is a residential care home on the leafy north end of the market town south of London where I grew up. It is across the street from the lawn bowls club which witnessed her final sporting triumphs.

Mum’s diminishing empire is one room on Dormouse wing. Home is tidy, functional and antiseptic. Every day, Zahid wheels his barrow past playful rodent silhouettes that adorn the wainscoting to wipe or vacuum every surface with zeal. Her world is condensed to a hospital-style mechanized bed, a recliner, a wardrobe of clothes she will never wear again, and that most necessary bathroom.

The \$2,000 recliner is new, with a paisley motif and a giant black cord that snakes under the bed. Thankfully, it has just one button to recline and one to push the sitter up and out. The mechanism is getting a workout — the windowsill is scuffed where it has pushed back too far.

Yusuf arrives with a cup of tea, a mission he will repeat all day. His family fled violence in Sierra Leone to The Gambia, so we have much in common because my extended family lives in West Africa. In his culture, caring for the elderly is both duty and joy.

I visit every day for almost two weeks, running out of conversation, fleeing her room when visiting nurses with muscular arms arrive in their royal blue uniforms to change bandages on Mum’s swollen legs. Tennis elbow has robbed her of wrist strength and unmentionable “bad stuff in my innards” has slowed her greatly. Lost hearing is the biggest annoyance, however; she cannot see the tiny batteries to change them when the aids whistle.

### Goodbye

It is time to leave. My last day features one final meeting with the attorney, the handing-over-the-keys ceremony at the old apartment, then early to bed before my flight to San Francisco.



May Webb served as a Red Cross volunteer during the World War II bombing of London.

Patrick Webb



May Webb and Patrick, her young trainee cowboy son, in England in 1959-60.

Patrick Webb

See *Mum*, Page C2