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# WEEKEND BREAK

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## Mum hangs on as life ebbs away

Writer, son can do nothing to stem the inevitable

By PATRICK WEBB

**S**URREY, England — The last time I wrote about my Mum I used the word “indestructible.”

I beg to revise that opinion.

She is barely hanging on, saddened by her own decay, frustrated, no, angry that she is fed pills twice a day by earnest caregivers at her care home south of London.

She is done with life. Incontinent, barely eating, apparently ready for death.

Visiting should be about her, not me. But a three-week jaunt to England — for what might be presumed to be my last visit — is painful, in part because of its everydayness.

Ten hours confined in a tin box followed by a sweaty walking workout through the London airport leads me to my rented car, a Ford Fiesta, the model my bride drove when we were first married.

Four decades ago, Mum and Dad visited for my fairytale wedding and returned for a couple of subsequent vacations in the states.

During one trip, they watched me graduate with my first college degree. If they were proud, they never mentioned it. They did point out the trek to La Grande was scenic but tedious, the meals gluttonous and wasteful. When I cleared out their home after Dad's death a few years back, I discovered they had saved every receipt, ticket and napkin.

### Taxing

My arrival elicits a broad grin from Mum, slumped in a recliner in a room crammed with her bed, a dresser and a well-used bathroom.

We chatter until our news is exhausted. She offers little. There have been few highlights to recall since January when I moved her to the care home from her tiny assisted living apartment.

As conversation wanes, I straighten the four teddy bears slouching on her bookshelf, following a long-standing family routine, greeting each one by name and alternately wiggling two paws. One day, soon likely, Mum's furry friends will be carefully stowed in my hand luggage and cross the Atlantic to come live with me.

But not yet.

Next, I busy myself with paperwork; it is my forte, after all. I answer her mail, file her bank statements, renew her blue passenger parking placard. I try to be useful.

She owes the national government \$65 in income tax. Really? I pay it, of course. English people don't complain because they are grateful for all the services they get back.

They embrace a pact they sealed with their government in 1948: “Care for me, from the cradle to the grave, and I will not grumble about taxes.”

It is a different mindset to the nation where I have lived for almost 40 years. Here, school bands must host bake sales and desperate insulin patients open GoFundMe accounts. Government is widely viewed as a pejorative, not a safety net whose priority is to care for its citizens.

### Sports

Mum survived World War II, serving as a Red Cross volunteer bandaging survivors from Hitler's London bombing raids.

Her two perfect children arrived in the 1950s and grew up in the Swinging Sixties. It was the era of miniskirts and Mini Coopers, with parliamentary power seesawing between socialism and conservatism, all played out to a Beatles' soundtrack.

A trained dressmaker, Mum eked out her meagre allowance creating dresses for herself and “exclusive” mod clothes for my brother and I. Later, she worked in the office at a high-end cigarette lighter factory and for an off-track bookmaker.

Our entire family are sports participants, not spectators. Mum nursed me through childhood asthma with soccer and running toughened my lungs. She embraced tennis, badminton and lawn bowls. Tennis elbow curtailed all competition; failing vision prevented



Photos by Patrick Webb

May Webb sits in the room of her residential care home in Surrey, England. At 94, she looks back on a life in which she survived German bombers, raised two children, won sports medals and made all her own clothes.

her sewing. One by one, other body parts failed.

### Tests

Mum is 94, the same age as the Queen of England. Young Elizabeth performed a role in the war, too, as a mechanic. Her Majesty made 300 public appearances last year. Mum made far fewer, almost entirely for medical tests. Her tiny frame is worn out; the scale reaches 100 pounds only if she is wearing heavy slippers. I don't wish her gone, but what the heck is there to test?

The one time she perks up is when I model a dark suit I have bought from the Marks & Spencer store for \$120. Despite the macular degeneration that has robbed most of her eyesight, she admires the way the creased 29-inch leg breaks correctly atop my shoe. My belly protrudes. “You don't button it up, anyway,” she quips, a rare glimpse of that old humor.

I tell her it is to wear for my Freemason speeches, but while she is in the residents' communal dining room I hide it in her wardrobe, handy for the time when I will need it next.

### Goodbye

Our last contact is phatic. “See you in the morning.” “No, you won't. I am leaving at 5 to drop off the car and beat the traffic around Heathrow.”

“Oh, well, you take care then.”

“I will.”

“Look after yourself.”

I squeeze her raised right hand, curled like a musician's would around the neck of a cello.

My last word to my Mum is, “OK.”

Our family doesn't go in for emotional hellos or goodbyes; there are no poignant moments for Webbs, no professions of love or gratitude.

### Dignity

Back on the North Coast, my feelings are bland, anticlimactic. I am not sad, bitter, numb or upset. I am just me, ready — yet Mummy's boys are never really ready, are they? — for that inevitable telephone call.

It will summon me to another 10-hour flight to the land of my birth, eating strange food, viewing a couple of movies I've missed, and a body-clock change that wobbles my equilibrium more on each trip.

But I'll go. I'll don that never-worn dark suit. And I'll try to cheer a packed crematorium with funny memories of their granny, their auntie, their mother-in-law, their friend.

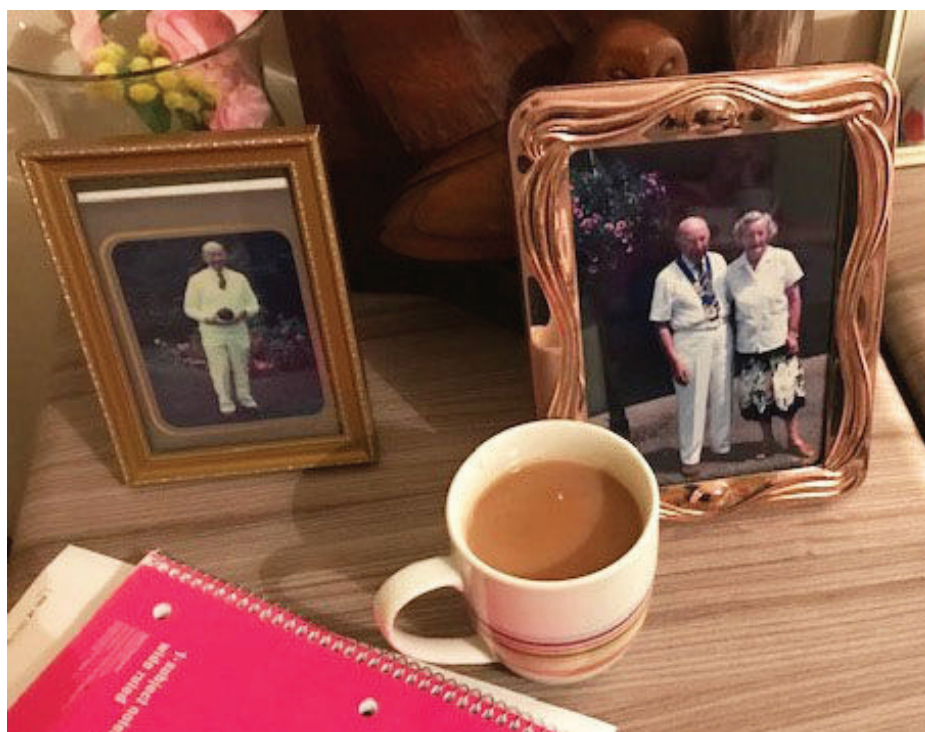
The woman who made me.

I want to remember her as the nimble sportswoman who could cross a tennis court in three strides to sweep up a backhand. Instead, all I see is gnarled hands clutching a wadded tissue, wiping drips from her nose and mouth as all dignity ebbs away.

British-born Patrick Webb of Long Beach, Washington, is the retired managing editor of *The Astorian*.



Cheery designs like these brighten the decor of the communal areas where residents take their meals together.



Photos on display mostly feature Webb family members with their sports trophies and medals.



Prominently displayed positive affirmations abound at the British residential care home.