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Joan's Story: Loving to the Very End

Joan is a loving mother and grandmother, a true gift to her family, who care for her with deep affection. She is the first supernumerary in Ottawa (Canada). In May, when many countries celebrate Mother's Day, we also celebrate those who care for their mothers with love and dedication. This weekend, we are also celebrating the Jubilee of Families, Grandparents and the Elderly.

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Dying to Meet You

Dying to Meet You is a project of cultural renewal, aiming to humanize conversations about suffering, death, meaning, and hope. Through writing, talks, events, short films, and collaboration with others, Amanda Achtman promotes a shared search to affirm the value of every human being.

In the following story, Amanda interviews Jill about the care she gives her mother Joan, an elderly woman with dementia.

Setting the stage

Joan sits with a kind, but distant, look in her eyes.

“Joan,” Amanda asks, “is it hard for you to lose your memory?”

Joan frowns. “Lose my memory?” she repeats. “Where did I lose my... my memory?”

Then she smiles, as if embracing the mystery with humour, and, half-joking, asks: “Did you... did *you* do it...?”

Amanda: “We came to interview you today. How do you feel about that?”

Joan: “I don’t mind at all if that’s what you want to do.”

Amanda: “How old are you?”

Joan: “Oh, many more years.”

Amanda: “What was your husband’s name?”

Joan looks up, trying to remember: “I should know this already... I... let me see...”

Her daughter Jill steps in: “Mom, Dad’s name... You always called him Gil. His name was Gilles. Gilles Lusignan. But you always called him Gil, because you spoke in English.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Joan nods. “That’s true.”

Amanda: “Joan, how many children do you have?”

“At least three,” she replies with a smile. “Three or more.”

Jill’s weekly visits

“I usually try to come see her a couple of times a week,” her daughter says. “I do her hair, sometimes help her shower, wash and style her hair. If it’s during the week, I just pop in and give it a little touch-up, curl it a bit. That’s always been part of our routine.”

Jill smiles and looks at her mother fondly. “I like making her laugh. And I also enjoy greeting other residents who don’t have anyone visiting them.”

Amanda: “Has her personality changed over the years?”

“Yes,” Jill answers. “She doesn’t like it when other people try to take care of her. Sometimes she gets upset with a worker, and it surprises us. But when we manage to calm her down and ground her again, she goes back to being herself.”

“Even though conversations can be hard sometimes,” she adds, “you have to know how to play along and keep going. Still, she’s the person you love. And you have the chance to share with her, to make her happy... and she makes us happy too.”

Meaning in illness

Amanda: “What do you think is the meaning of having dementia? Why is this part of the human condition?”

“It’s a mystery,” Jill replies. “I don’t think anyone *wants* to have dementia, right? Everyone wants to keep their faculties until the end. But... it’s part of letting the person go.”

Amanda: “And do you think even young people can learn something from this?”

Jill: “Yes, I think it’s valuable to learn that we can’t control everything. People who try to control everything end up depressed. Because life is full of surprises, and you can’t have it all under control.”

Amanda: “One of the reasons many Canadians say they would consider euthanasia is the fear of being a burden — especially mothers and

grandmothers. Is your mother a burden?”

“No, definitely not,” Jill answers without hesitation. “Seriously.”

Amanda: “Do you think the way she raised you influences how you care for her now?”

Jill: “Absolutely. We had a loving mother, and we all want to love her until the very end. I always joke with my kids: ‘Alright, guys, I want to look good when I’m 90. So you’re going to come, help me get cleaned up, do my hair and nails, and all that.’”

Amanda (to Joan): “You look very elegant today.”

Joan: “Oh really? Well... thank God.”

Amanda (to Jill): “So if your mother isn’t a burden... what is she to you?”

Jill: “She’s a gift. She’s not a burden. She’s a gift — right up to the day she

goes to heaven and sees my dad...
and dances a good dance with him
up there.”

Amanda: “Are you still yourself, the
way you’ve always been?”

Joan: “Well... I think so.”

Amanda: “Is life always good?”

Joan: “Yes. I’d say life is very good.
And so, the question is: How do we
keep going?”

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