

## Clotheslines

by *Beth Powning*

*The clothes left hanging*

Clothes get lost at the Alzheimer's home. On the day that we visit, my mother-in-law, Peg, is wearing someone else's mint-green sweater. Her new nightgown, the one I gave her with pink stripes and lace at the neck, has vanished.

It is a Montessori Alzheimer's home. In thrust-out window bays, along the halls, there are baskets filled with towels, socks, shirts, smelling of detergent and dryer perfume, bearing signs: "Please fold." The walls are papered in country kitchen designs — hearts and flowers, roosters, stars. There are knotty pine bureaus and wicker wreaths brightened with strawflowers and satin ribbons. A blue carpet hushes footsteps, absorbs differences. Wheelchairs come floating down the halls, thin hands whispering over their wheels. No one's shoes squeak.

Peg lets her head fall back as my husband, Peter, brushes her hair. His hands gather the fine strands, still brownish grey. She closes her eyes, sparing him the sight of their expression: shocked, horrified, as if she's been told something so alarming she has no idea what to say, and yet struggles to respond. Her mouth strains, then falls slack. The skin at her temples is translucent, has a sheen, like sunlight burning in ground mist. In it curve the fine lines of her intelligence, her sensibility. These lines do not fall slack.

Peter sweeps the brush over her temples, draws it back. Over and over, the brush collects stray hairs with soft-bristled patience. Her eyelids quiver, she makes a small moan, her lips fumble towards utterance. Her husband, Garrett, holds one of her hands in both of his. He looks at her intently, his love burning as if he is 21 and not 80.

We're sitting in the dining room. The other woman at the table is holding an animated, whispered conversation with an invisible companion.

*"She ... hers ... I said ... I didn't ...."*

Food arrives on a tray. Milkshake, creamed chicken, lima beans. My father-in-law is rueful.

"She hates lima beans," he remarks.

After she went to the Alzheimer's home, he moved to a smaller apartment. He covered the walls with her pencil drawings and water colors. Chickadees on a winter branch. Birch trees. Two stalks of delphiniums. Cattails, split by seedfluff. Her fingers held the pencil at the very tip, so that the smallest pull would render a mark. Or she dabbed with the pointed tip of her brush. Scratch by scratch, stroke by stroke. Hesitant, careful. Humble.

He puts a single bean on the end of a fork. He touches it to her mouth. His tongue pokes out, prods his own lips.

"Nice lima beans," he suggests.

She recoils, freezes in an attitude of protest: palm turned out, lips drawn down. I notice Peter's hand tighten on the hairbrush, feel how he restrains his impulse to help as his father coaxes, teases, tricks, cajoles, finally introduces the lima bean past his mother's lips. She fumbles the bean with her tongue. Her mouth is the place where her suffering is revealed. She works at her suffering the same way she works at the bean: with a slow tongue, as if words are a lingering, tormenting taste.

My memory makes a liaison between the pointless, perfumed laundry in the halls, and Peg's passion.

Among her early water colors is one of a windy day. A young woman throws her head back, her hands lifted to a clothesline. Everything is in motion: the young woman's skirt; the clothing already pegged to the line; the green tree, and the yellow flowers. It is called "Windy Monday," for Monday, in 1946, is wash day. The woman wears white ankle socks. She has two barrettes, one on either side of her head, exposing her temples. The act of hanging out clothing seems a dance of delight.

When they moved from their log cabin in the countryside to a condominium where clotheslines were forbidden, she told me that she had a recurring nightmare. In the dream, she's in the midst of hanging out her laundry, when suddenly she's surrounded with policemen, who arrest her.

I'm watching my mother-in-law's lips tremble, obediently opening against the lima bean, and I picture her on her first morning at the condominium. She's standing in the dark closet-like laundry room, thinking of her clothesline at the log cabin, strung between two gigantic maples. Even when she was in her forties, she hung laundry with the pleasure of a newly-wed, painstaking with her combinations — facecloths, white, white, blue, blue, then shirts, shoulder to shoulder, then sheets, and Garrett's cotton handkerchiefs, and the matched socks. She reached up, the wooden clothespins pivoted on their tiny, rusty hinges, she heard the chatter of birds, smelled earth and grass. Later she paused by the window, watching the ordered, safely-pinned clothing dancing on the air like wind-flung leaves. And when the clothes were dry, she would spread her arms, embracing sheets, battling them from the wind, hugging them to her body. On the dining room table, her unhurried hands folded pillowcases, smoothed away wrinkles. At bedtime, she remarked peaceably on the cool freshness rising from the cloth when she and Garrett slid between the sheets.

Did she try to make sense of the clothesline rule every time she stood in that dark little laundry room?

Wondering if it was because they reminded people of tenement buildings with criss-crossing lines of immigrant clothing making crazy-quilts over alleys? Or perhaps it was an aesthetic of uniformity. Everyone's clothesline would be different. One line might be empty, sagging, its clothespins still attached. The next might be flap-full of clothing: there might be pink nighties, blue flannel pajamas, frayed dishcloths, bras, jockstraps, and stained panties. Random, unplanned. Like the marsh, just past the condominium complex's gated entrance. To the left was a golf course, with fluttering flags and tidy-stanced people in white shorts. But to the right was a remnant of marsh. The brook came down cold from the woods, spilled into dark waters where turtles sunned on a rock and cattails blew seedfluff onto the golf course. The green-scummed water drowned the maples and turned them into spiked grey remnants shaggy with loose bark, whose dead branches fell in a litter of twigs and rotten wood across the road. When they purchased their condo, the management had apologized for the marsh, saying it would soon be cleaned up.

I picture her on an April evening, sitting on her stone-flagged patio, wearing coat and gloves, listening to the spring mating cries of the marsh frogs. Her mind runs easily as water as she ponders the branchy tangle of her life. An only child, she married the boy she had loved since junior high school, and they had four children, the chaos of sisters and brothers she herself had missed. She longed to create a place where no one would be lonely, ever. She wanted band-aids and bed sheets, sunshine and porridge. She dreamed of book bags, barrettes, skates, swimming lessons. She never imagined the patchwork of misfortune: depression, alcoholism, deaths, drugs, rebellion, rage, sorrow, divorce.

When they moved to the condominium, Peter and I were living in New Brunswick. They would drive north to visit. She sat blissful in the rocking chair, holding her first grandchild, listening to the chug-chug of the washing machine, waiting for the wet clothing. Then she took the wicker laundry basket out into the morning.

Smell of spruce trees on the northern air. Cloth diapers. The joy of it. Find the corners. Snap. Snap. Cold fingers scrabbling in the clothespin bag tied at her waist.

And after she finished hanging out the wash, she stood beneath the budding maples, thinking how clothes on a line bore no trace of the people who wore them, and that there was something sorrowful about this. As if no life would ever leave a mark. Rather, it was water's embrace that she saw. It had tightened the sinews of thread, wrung the cloth, left it wrinkled and shrunken. Everything was smaller. Corners pressed inwards. The diapers would need to be stretched square.

And then, even as this thought crossed her mind, the wind rose, the laundry lifted. The backs of shirts became pillows. The sheets were thrown out in slow, soft lunges. The grandchild's diapers lilted and fluttered like rose petals. She slid into the day, so enormous, with its towering spring clouds, its sodden leaves pierced by green shoots that made round holes through the decaying tissue. She saw how the clothing had become innocent. Fresh. Gotten a new start. She reflected upon the freedom of the laundry, even though it was tossed, and tugged, and had no choice but to ride the wind.

She pondered how every young family starts again. Bravely, certain that they will make a good life. She remembered her own first four-roomed house and how, when she was young, she pictured life as a road leading up a hill. Once the top was gained, that was where, she'd thought, one lived the rest of one's life. On

the flat, solid plateau. Unchanging. With a long view.

And then she turned, and walked up over the brown April grass, smelling the wood smoke from my kitchen stove. Thinking that she might never reach the plateau. That starting over, in both small and big ways, was something she'd become good at.

Now her eyes are squeezed tight shut, she's working the lima bean round and round in her mouth. Her husband puts out his hand, held flat. She spits out the bean.

"Still doesn't like them," he says. He's pleased, amused.

The other people in the dining room are beginning to rise. One woman by the window sits straight-backed with her hands in her lap, staring at the empty table. Another woman leans forward and remarks, "Not much to do in this place." A well-dressed woman stands. She is agitated, like someone who has lost a child in a shopping mall. She stops at each table, speaks in a low, apologetic voice. "Excuse me, do you know the way out of here? I have to go see my daughter. Can you tell me the way out?"

We push Peg's wheelchair into the courtyard. After the air-conditioned rooms, the Florida air feels heavy. The sky is a flat, drought blue. The cement sidewalk is smooth as carpet. It runs between the flat-roofed stucco building and a high wooden fence. There are bird feeders, and gazebos with wooden benches, and metal stands filled with white sand and cigarette butts. A strip of garden borders the building. Its plants are large-leaved, glossy, with occasional blooms like the beaks of tropical birds. She loved wildflowers with delicate blossoms that made wind-rippled carpets beneath oaks and maples, or drifted in the shade of hemlocks. Wild violets, bloodroot, spring anemone, lady's slipper, mountain laurel.

Peter pushes the wheelchair, Garrett and I walk behind. We go slowly, since time, here, is like unspun wool, fat, barely cohesive. Peter is leaning forward, his elbows out like wings. He's murmuring into her hair. He speaks of skateboards, his pet iguana, peanut butter soup. Once, she reaches out and pats the air. He gathers her hand and folds it beneath his on the wheelchair's arm. She says his brother's name.

We go into the shade of a gazebo. The lines around her mouth are deep, a bruised blue. There are bristles on her chin, and her mouth has no shape. She closed down so slowly, a process of drying, becoming unsupple, like a leaf losing its chlorophyll. Withdrawing from one thing and then another. Her bicycle. Her volunteer work as a docent. Her book club. Her outings with friends to sketch or paint. Cooking. Walking. Her crossword puzzle. Her own words. Her sense of her surroundings.

One day, sitting beside me on the couch, surrounded by her own paintings, she began to weep. She waved her hands vaguely.

"I'm afraid," she said. "I'm afraid they will forget me."

She gives no indication of enjoying the air, the sun. Garrett glances at his watch. It's time for her bath. We wheel her back into the Alzheimer's home, away from the air, away from the small, placid voices of sparrows.

## AUTHOR BIO:

BETH POWNING was born in Connecticut, and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 1972, with a concentration in Creative Writing. She studied with E.L. Doctorow. She lives in New Brunswick, Canada with her artist husband. She is the author of numerous articles, essays, and short stories, and has published four books: *Home: Chronicle of a North Country Life*, (essays and her own photography) (1996); *Shadow Child: An Apprenticeship in Love and Loss* (1999); *The Hatbox Letters*, a bestselling novel, long-listed for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (2004); and *Edge Seasons* (2005). Her new novel, *The Sea Captain's Wife*, is due from Knopf Canada January, 2010. For more detail, go to her website, [www.powning.com](http://www.powning.com), where her newsletters are archived, and her photography can be enjoyed.

*Where loss is found.*

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