

Now It's My Turn

The emotional roller coaster of caring for your aging parents.

BY AIMEE LEE BALL ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN COLLIER

Oh, yes, I have been here before: mother and daughter in a doctor's office painted the color of iceberg lettuce. Worried looks, imperfectly disguised with false smiles. Offers to "hold my hand while he gives you the shot." I have been a player in this little tableau before, but now I am the grown-up daughter—and the patient is my mother.

I am the only child of an only child, and it comes down to this: My mother is getting older, and I cannot bear it—cannot handle any dissipation of her vigor and mobility, cannot contemplate a time when she might not be so dependably independent, making her wild sculptural jewelry and her famous almond *biscotti*. My mother is still beautiful and sharp-witted, still turning heads with her great legs (which I did not inherit) and still subtracting fifteen years from her real age (let's just say 70 and holding) without engendering doubt. Her heart and lungs are as strong as her obdurate will—a lifelong source of contention between us—and last year's successful hip replacement restored an almost girlish spirit. But she's an inch shorter than she used to be, and recently she stopped driving because her reflexes aren't quite up to par, and half of her kitchen counter is given over to an arsenal of pills in the war against arthritis. We are each other's only claim to a traditional family—there are no siblings to consult about her welfare, and my father died when I was a teenager—so my mother's mortality has become a palpable concern, a posture I assume every day, an immutable part of my identity, like eye color or height.

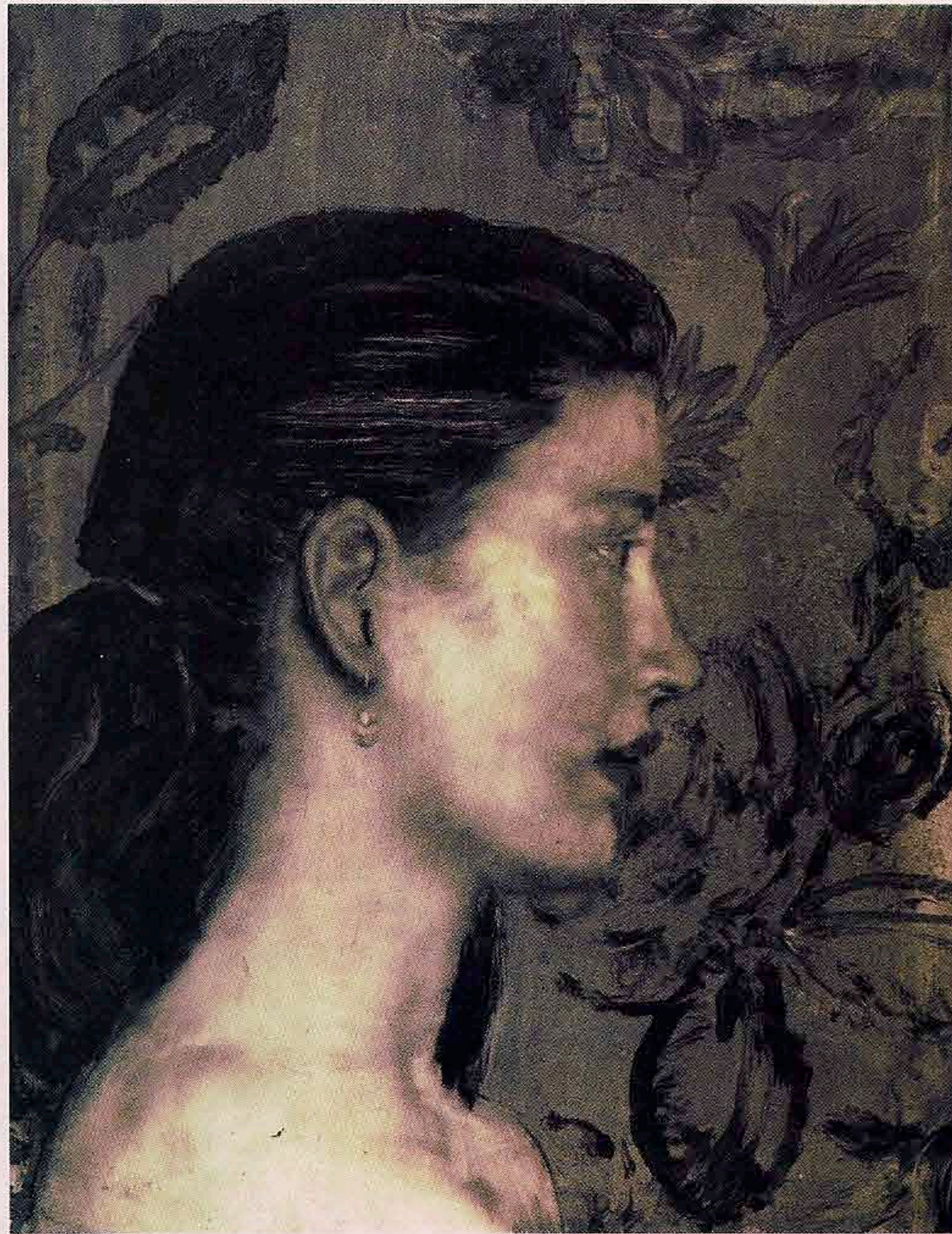
I haul this concern, somewhat inappropriately, to an appointment with my gynecologist, who is my contemporary. "Of course," she says matter-of-factly. "If I try to call my mother and there's no answer, I'm sure she's dead on the bathroom floor." It

is the sort of semineurotic, borderline hysteria that we would protest fiercely if our mothers turned it on us. Certainly we know that anxiety doesn't help—and neither does resolve, and neither does money. We know that even Caroline Kennedy couldn't save her mother.

How did we get here? For one thing, we're living longer. The number of senior citizens in this country has burgeoned in recent decades. The National Institute on Aging reports that the average life expectancy at the turn of the century was 49; now it's 75. In 1900, only a small percentage of the population lived to age 65; now it's about 70 percent. The elderly are the fastest-growing age group in the country, and the population over 85 is increasing fastest of all,

according to the Census Bureau. Caring for one's aging parents is a more prevalent topic in the '90s for many reasons, the most obvious being this: There are more of us doing it. But to whom should we turn for help? There's a U.S. Senate Committee on Aging, an Older Americans Act, and dozens of coalitions and councils on aging—yet none of them can tell you what to do when you father won't take his blood-pressure medicine or your mother refuses to have a mammogram.

Despite the blatant graying of America, we are wonderful at denial in our personal microcosm, as if this business of age and



infirmity were somebody else's problem. "Usually what happens in families is that no one has really prepared for a parent's future," says Dr. Ronald D. Wynne, director of Washington Assessment and Therapy Services, which provides advice and counseling for children and their aging parents. "We avoid it, and then some stranger is asking, 'How would you like this expensive nursing home, or that rosewood casket?' There are whole industries feeding off our anxiety and avoidance."

I remember my shock upon seeing my mother walk with a cane for the first time, a temporary concession to an ambush by the enemy arthritis. And not one of those pretty, hand-carved walking sticks favored by elegant Englishmen. This was straight from the medical-supply store, with a leatherette wrist strap so it couldn't slip out of reach and a metal tripod on the business end of the thing to give good traction. I felt as if I had learned, all at once, that there is no Santa Claus, Easter bunny or tooth fairy. But accommodating an aging parent presents just such a series of startling

and undignified "firsts": the first time your father asks for the motorized cart to get to his airport gate, or the bus driver makes the bus "kneel" for him; the first time your mother qualifies for a senior-citizen discount at the movies, or you do her hair in a hospital bed. The firsts often get worse, not better: Canes become walkers, walkers become wheelchairs, wheelchairs become gurneys in nursing homes.

And we all know what kind of she-devil puts her parent in a home. A recent survey by *Consumer Reports* confirms the unthinkable: The quality of care at thousands of the nation's

nursing homes ranges from "inadequate to scandalous," and the good ones are hard to find. About 40 percent of the 16,000 facilities certified by the Health Care Financing Administration have repeatedly violated government standards for safety and nutrition, and the erratic enforcement of such laws permits the offenders to continue operating. "The public would rather not hear about the things I've seen," says David Bragg, a Texas lawyer

who wrote a critical report on the nursing-home industry for then-Texas Governor Ann Richards in 1992. "If these violations had occurred at a day-care center, the community would have lynched the owner from the nearest light pole."

We have a warm and fuzzy fantasy that elderly parents should properly be taken into the ample bosom of a devoted family. But we are flat-chested. We are also romantically deluded, according to Norman Daniels, former chairman of the philosophy department at Tufts University. In his book *Am I My Parents' Keeper?* he exposes a pervasive belief that "in our shared past there was a Golden Age when

family responsibilities were well defined and widely respected" and that "we can simply extrapolate current limits to filial obligations from past ones." Our image of the past is mythical, he contends. Often, in European cultures, when a son or daughter took on the obligation of caring for a parent, it was in exchange for special property privileges. "What the traditionalist nostalgically sees as a warm network of love and family responsibility appears to the colder historical eye as a complex mechanism in which care was exchanged for access to the means of production (albeit at least some of the time with a sense of love or ▶160



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moral obligation). . . . These obligations were also likely to be burdensome over a much shorter period of time, since expected life span for the elderly was shorter. What burdens were imposed were more likely to be shared by a greater number of children per aged parent." In other words, there weren't a lot of 70-year-old mothers and fathers around in the old days, but if they should live so long, your seven sisters and brothers would be helping out.

I call the American Association of Retired Persons for information on parenting our parents. "Actually," says the nice woman at AARP, "we don't like that term. No matter what shape our parents are in, they're not our children." This is well-meaning sophistry. Sure, we can label the dilemma with a more palatable and politically correct name like "elder-care." But talk to someone who's giving her mother a sponge bath, or buying her adult diapers, or helping her learn how to walk with silicone knees. If that doesn't feel like parenting, perhaps you were raised by wolves. The world is suddenly full of bogeymen again, only now the bogeymen are hiding under your parents' beds, with names like carcinoma and arrhythmia and Alzheimer's.

One woman who has brought both of her parents into her home tells of special efforts to make them feel they haven't been put out to pasture. Going off to work, she will say to her father, "Pop, lend me \$10 so I don't have to stop at the bank." Making pancakes one morning, she watched her mother, disabled after a stroke, start to cry. "I know," said the daughter cheerfully, "you'd like to be making pancakes, too. But you've made enough pancakes in your life. Time for you to be the first one served." This scenario *can* be taken too far. In the book *You and Your Aging Parent* by Barbara Silverstone and Helen Kandel Hyman, a teacher describes her dismay on hearing herself say to her ailing mother, "Now, let's hurry up and finish this nice soup," as if she were in kindergarten. "I have three children at home and twenty in my class at school," the teacher said. "I certainly

don't need another one. What I need is a mother, and I'll never have that again."

I had a dream before my mother's hip surgery: She was dancing to music from a radio tuned to station WH20. Ooooooooh, my unconscious is saying—Mother feels like water, slipping through cracks, slipping through my fingers, slipping away. It is easier to deal with these issues obliquely, asleep, than to confront the reality. I've known smart, pragmatic people who've nevertheless bought Rollerblades for a father who limps, or a watch with tiny numerals for a mother who needs the large-print *New York Times*, or who insist on specialist after specialist after expensive, out-of-town, redundant specialist for a parent who has been given unpleasant medical news. "One of the oldest and most effective tricks of our culture is denying that a problem exists or pretending it's being taken care of," says Bernard Beck, associate chairman of the sociology department at Northwestern University. It is scary to face one's parents' mortality; it's even scarier to think that the next phase of life is facing one's own.

So this is the dance we do: sidestepping the disbelief, worry, frustration, embarrassment, sorrow and rage of watching parents grow old. And, hell, this is nothing compared to the emotional roller coaster they are riding. "No mother could be prouder of a daughter's accomplishments," says one successful woman I know. "Her apartment is a virtual shrine to my awards, travels and achievements. But I know that a part of her covets my health and mobility, the opportunities still ahead. Anytime I'm going on a trip, she teases, 'Take me with you,' and it cuts like a knife. We were watching a program about Nelson Mandela, and she said, almost to herself, 'I would love to go to Africa.' There was nothing to say. We both know she's not going on safari."

This is absolutely unoriginal and universal. The only escape is if you hate your parents. If you actually love them, it's double jeopardy—the endless, ageless conundrum of loving people and seeing them in trouble or in pain. It shakes you

to the rafters. Concern for their welfare makes you vulnerable. "Once you hear the words 'mother' and 'cancer' in the same sentence," says a woman I know, "the world no longer seems to be built on solid ground."

Last year my friend Georgia's mother was told that her tumor had returned, and Georgia became obsessed with writing her eulogy, erratically requesting pen and paper in the middle of cab rides or dinner parties when she had an inspiration she needed to jot down. This sounded macabre to me, but she insisted it was not. She had attended too many funerals (mostly of friends' parents) where a priest or rabbi said some generic kind words that had nothing to do with the true spirit or personality of the deceased. When her mother died, she knew she would be the only one who could say: "My mother was a great broad. . . ."

I measure stories of other people's parents against my own, the way some people watch soap operas to make their lives more bearable. My mother eats fresh vegetables. I trot out this piece of information like a badge of honor that differentiates her from other widows who eat frozen foods and TV dinners. I also collect tales from the front: a woman whose mother has been evicted from a retirement home for "bad behavior," another who cooks meals for her husband's dead first wife's parents. I am weeping for these people, these parents and these children, but I am also saying a Hail Mary and a Shema Yisroel and a Hare Krishna (I'll take benediction wherever I can find it). Then I hear about a 97-year-old lady in Minnesota who gets up at 5 A.M. two days a week to make doughnuts and take them to old people in the nursing home, and I am jealous. I want my mother to be that good. I want my mother to be George Burns—playing *The Palace* at 99.

The mother of my former significant other was in good shape except that she was blind. She lived in Atlanta with her daughter and son-in-law, keeping to her own wing of the house. She was self-effacing to the point of needless con- ▶163

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trition, acutely aware that she was, however congenial, a responsibility and an intrusion. At one point, the brother-in-law started making noises about taking a year off from his executive vice-presidency and riding around the country in an RV, and my ex started thinking that maybe it was his turn to take care of Mom (this from a guy whose refrigerator contained nothing but beer and smoked oysters). We'd take a drive in the country, and he'd scope out small towns with the eye of a gemologist inspecting a stone. "I could do this," he'd say with small, dry-mouthed enthusiasm. "I could get a house here with my mother and commute to the city." I'd smile thinly and think to myself: And what about me? Would I get his mother, too?

Well, yes, sometimes you do get his mother, because you're a good person or a guilty person or a person whose husband reacts to the words "nursing home" with the words "over my dead body," who thinks that any problem can be addressed by writing a check or hiring the proper help. "For a while in America we threw overboard the complex family and got accustomed to a lean-and-mean household size," says Beck of Northwestern. "We no longer have the skills we need to deal with collections of people living under the same roof, although we've reinvented that phenomenon somewhat with serial monogamy and blended families. In a multigenerational household, it's not enough to rely on an old set of rules for parents and children. We don't know how to be the middle-generation person, how to be somebody's child and somebody's parent in the same house. It presents day-to-day problems of authority and intimacy, questions of who has to butt out of who else's business."

Parent-child role reversal was not part of the curriculum for baby boomers. We spent a decade or two in self-fulfillment, maybe delaying childbirth while we shattered glass ceilings, only to find ourselves part of a new demographic: "the sandwich generation," caring for our own children and our parents. And this is an endless loop. If you have a baby at 40, do you real-

ize you will be at least 65 when she graduates from medical school? If she's an only child, she'll be fretting about you the same way I am now fretting about my mother, with no sibling for emotional, physical or financial support.

The real "till death do us part" has less to do with modern marriage (half of those vows are broken, after all) than with parent-child relationships, according to psychologist Nancy K. Schlossberg, who teaches at the University of Maryland. She talks about a prevailing lament she hears from colleagues and friends: "I rush from my job to pick up the children and visit my mother. Then back home to cook dinner for my husband and children. I have no time for myself."

There are some bright spots in this landscape, says Dr. Lissy Jarvik, professor of psychiatry at UCLA School of Medicine and coauthor of *Parentcare: A Commonsense Guide for Adult Children*. "People can grow closer," she says. "Parents and children who never got along can discover areas where they feel similarly—perhaps, say, about child rearing—which may lead to a rapprochement." As Oscar Wilde wrote: "Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them."

No neat and tidy way to tie up this package. And you can be sure—very sure—the package will be passed along, like that Christmas fruitcake that gets recycled from one unwelcoming recipient to another. There is a classic parable about the continuity of the parent-child crucible, a cautionary tale that is repeated in similar versions in the folklore of cultures from Chinese to Jewish to Pakistani: An aging mother went to live with her daughter and grandson. One night at dinner she dropped a porcelain soup bowl, which broke into a thousand pieces. The daughter was so upset that she consigned the older woman to eating from a wooden bowl. When the grandmother died, the young boy put a package on the top shelf of his closet. "What is that?" asked his mother. "I'm saving the wooden bowl," said the boy, "for you." ❖

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