

# Forever Five Years Old

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From *Even the Terrible Things Seem Beautiful to me now*

**SOMETIMES LATELY I SNAP AWAKE** in the middle of the night and say out loud, "I miss my mother." In that moment, I feel both middle-age and 5 years old, and my mother appears in front of me as a woman both young and ancient.

Lying there in the dark, I often feel her fingers graze my neck the way they did one Thanksgiving afternoon when she was 35 and I lazed in her lap while she fiddled with my hair.

And always on those wakeful nights, I feel what my fingers feel all these years later whenever I lean down to hug her hello or goodbye. I feel her papery, soft skin and the shrinking bones that seem hardly sturdier than eggshells.

Finally, I sink back to sleep, away from the black questions of 3 a.m., away from wondering: How will I bear it when my mother's gone? Why don't I see her more while she's still here?

There are perfectly good reasons I don't see my mother more. They're the same reasons millions of other people don't see their mothers more. We live in a world that makes it easy and acceptable for children and their parents to live like citizens of independent countries.

I have a life and people I care about in the city where I live. My mother has a life and people she cares about in the city where she lives. To see each other, we have to jump the hurdles of money, time and distance. The busier I am and the frailer she gets, the higher these hurdles seem.

Like so many people I know, I tell myself that the geographical gap between me and my mother - to whom I am otherwise very close - is natural, even right. Parents send their children into the world like kites, and the generous ones, the brave ones, the ones like my mother, eventually relax their grip on the string and take both pride and courage from watching their children fly.

Or so I tell myself. The adult in me believes it; the 5-year-old just wants her mama.

And that's the problem. Inside most every busy, competent adult is a 5-year-old who still needs her mother. The older my mother gets, the more often that 5-year-old in me emerges in the middle of the night, grieving prematurely for a loss that, with some luck, will not come for a long time.

"You feel that way even though she probably made you crazy the last time you talked to her, right?" says a friend who is made routinely crazy by a mother she adores.

Of course my mother makes me crazy. Doesn't yours? And she makes me crazier now than she ever did when I was younger. Now she makes me crazy just by getting old. The 5-year-old in me wants her to cut it out. Get over it. Shape up, Mother.

My impatience is irrational, unfair, immature, and I would never admit it if so many other perfectly reasonable adults hadn't admitted the same unreasonable, childish thoughts to me.

The craziness I feel over my mother getting old - the impatience and anger bred of fear - is compounded by the distance. From 2,000 miles away, all I can do is listen, advise, harangue and

hope across the telephone wires.

"I decided I was going to die," my mother, who never complains, said on the phone not long ago. She slipped this fact into our chitchat as idly as if she were announcing her plans for breakfast.

She laughed. I didn't. She explained the symptoms that for several days had led her to this conclusion.

"So," she said, "I started getting my affairs organized. You know, that old thing of not wanting to be wearing dirty underwear when you go to the hospital."

She said she was better now, however, and had decided to live another 20 years. She was still laughing. I still wasn't. I hung up and bought a plane ticket.

And on this Mother's Day, my inner 5-year-old would like to make a suggestion to all the adult 5-year-olds out there: Go see your mother. Let her make you crazy while she still can.