

*The Pianist's Only Daughter: A Memoir* by Kathryn Betts Adams,

Excerpt from Chapter 20: "Holding On and Letting Go"

When my rental car pulls up in the driveway of their Afton house in the early spring of 2013, my mother pokes her head out the front door and looks at me in a different way. Her eyes are wide, and she doesn't smile. For a moment she hasn't recognized me, and I see that more than merely wondering who this might be, she looks suspicious and doubtful. After I get out of the car and she registers who I am, we hug, me gently placing my hands on her bony back. Inside, I see the large jigsaw puzzle covering one half of the dining room table, and as usual, the bundles of mail piled high on the card table in the adjacent den. My father is at the piano, and we have a quick hug before he continues to play, and I return to the kitchen.

Mom pads around in her bare feet, wearing a partly buttoned shirt, the top of her nightgown bunched up around her waist, the bottom part hanging down to her knees. She asks me to make coffee in the Mr. Coffee pot while she gets the rest of her clothes on, walking back to the bedroom with purpose to help maintain her balance, bent forward, each foot "bam" on the floor, almost like a march. A little bandage patch next to her nose shows where she recently had a skin cancer removed. Dad has been caring for it by changing the bandage and applying Vaseline daily, happily playing the role of doctor to his patient.

We sit together over coffee and packaged cookies in the warm open kitchen, and my concerns about her initial reaction to my arrival fade as I relish these familiar coffee chat moments. After a while, I hop up to clear our dishes. When I turn, I see that Mom's struggling with the effort to rise from her chair, her hands on the table, trying to push herself up. "Let me give you a hand there," I say, and she rises easily with a little pull from both my hands.

The next day, the weather has done that wonderful Minnesota thing where it starts melting and greening with a few crocuses blooming, although it's still pretty cold. My father is in the living room composing at the piano, totally engrossed, with the TV on nearby. Feeling the urge to get out and enjoy the day for a while, I ask Mom if she'd like to go out for lunch with me. She and I love to eat out, and sometimes Dad can be a bit of a damper on just enjoying the food, worried as he is about fat and cholesterol and commenting on everyone else's choices that he considers unhealthy. My father is usually happy having a minimal lunch anyway, so I decide Mom and I should go just the two of us, and we can get coffee after.

She doesn't say no, so I grab our jackets and purses and shout to Dad that we'll be back in an hour or so. We end up at a new Noodles and Company in a strip mall in Hudson, a place I think she'll like, where I help her out of the car and to a seat.

When I bring our food to the table, Mom begins to eat her teriyaki noodles with gusto. She's leaning forward so far that her chin hovers just slightly above the bowl as she spoons in the food. "How is it?" I ask.

"Mmmm, very good," she says, sloppily taking another spoonful, not looking up. I continue to observe her for longer than perhaps would be polite, when she looks up and says, "What are

you looking at me for? Is something the matter?" I can't answer. I'm thinking that she seems unaware of table manners, eating with her mouth open, spilling quite a bit of the dark sauce on her shirt.

"Nothing, Mama, you're fine. I'm glad you like the noodles. It's a nice place, right?" And I look away.

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One morning during my parents' last visit to us in Ohio, I wandered into the guest room where I found Mom sitting on the bed, weepy and despairing because she couldn't get her socks on. I quickly established that she hadn't had her morning medication yet, and after I got it for her, it took nearly half an hour before she felt better. That scene frightened me, witnessing the physical and emotional effects of missing a dose, so now whenever we're together, I watch the time and watch her for signs she's becoming agitated or impaired, something like noticing that your cranky child might be hungry.

Thus, as we are finishing our Noodles and Company lunch, I realize it's about time for the next dose of Parkinson's medications. Mom still has some water in her plastic glass, so I say, "Let's get your pills out and take them now, then we can go to Starbucks for lattes." Her purse is hanging on the back of her chair. I bring it up to the table and we look inside but see only her Kleenex, a comb, a few dollar bills, and a lipstick. No pillbox.

"I'm afraid we forgot it," she says softly, sounding little-girlish and embarrassed.

"Oh darn, I should have checked," I say, trying not to sound annoyed. She's supposed to keep the pillbox in her purse at all times, so we know where it is and have it available on any outings. But all the same, I should have checked. "We'd better go straight home. That's okay. We can make some coffee there."

Later that week when the three of us are out to dinner, Mom goes alone to the ladies' room, and I decide I may as well go, too, and follow after a few minutes. She is in a stall but opens the door after I announce I'm there. "Can you help me get my pants up?" she asks plaintively, on the edge of tears, standing with her elastic waistband around her hips. "I just don't have the strength right now."

Over the years, more than one round of physical therapy has been prescribed by Mom's neurologist in an effort to maintain her strength, but her enthusiasm for the exercises would wane each time once she had to do them at home. Now she's weaker than I realized. It's affecting her ability to do important everyday tasks independently, like managing her own clothing.

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In the living room my parents have a cozy set-up in front of the TV, where they sit side by side in the his-and-hers oversized recliners they picked out at a furniture showroom a few years ago. The chairs' girth overwhelms the space, but they form the perfect command center for two, with a tall end table, reading lamps, and a wastebasket conveniently positioned between them. They often eat breakfast and sometimes even dinner right here. In the evenings during my visits, I have to sit to one side on a smaller chair to see the TV, or on the circa 1980 low-slung sofa across from them to converse.

It is there, sinking into the well-worn sofa cushions, that I prepare to lay out my argument that my parents should consider moving to a senior living facility, either here in Minnesota or near me in California. I strongly believe that they need to move out of this house, even though I

know they've been doing their best to cope all along. I anticipate Dad will not want to move. Making changes takes time and energy (i.e., causes stress), and it is human nature to try and maintain the status quo.

After I get their attention, the TV on mute, I summarize my thinking, focusing on their options. They could move out near Mark and me and get away from the Minnesota winters completely. I would help them find a good place to move into. Or they might prefer to stay here in the area where they have so many connections. In that case, I can help them find a nice community here with meals and services provided, so they don't have to worry about the weather. And they won't have a driveway that is a block long, uphill. (And, I think but don't say, where it will be easier to get help for Mom to shower, dress, and so forth, because she's not going to be independent with those activities of daily living for much longer.)

My father is not convinced. "Yeah," he says, "but we're doing all right here so far. We like visiting you in the winter. That helps."

He's the sole owner of the Afton house and he loves it dearly, especially its picturesque country setting: the fields on three sides, with woods beyond, two barns, and many mature trees. This property represents a lot of his life—his financial and career success, his special bond with nature, his past with Sharon and memories of Thomas's childhood. More than once he has said, completely seriously, "If I have to leave this place, I'll die!"

My mother, on the other hand, has already told me she'd be happy to move—she remembers how tough the recent winter has been, cooped up for days at a time due to bitter cold and lots of snow. Though she has made this her home, it was Sharon's house first. She's lonely sometimes, since my father spends long hours practicing the piano and composing, or out on the tractor in the summertime mowing the huge lawn.

Right now in the three-way conversation, however, Mom does not seem up to advocating for herself. She looks worriedly from Dad to me, hoping to avoid conflict.

"Well, the time may come soon, so it's good to be thinking about it now," is my closing comment before Dad turns the TV sound back on.

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As I stare out the double-paned airplane window at the sodden MSP airport around me, the other planes near mine look grimy and the guys in big coats with orange signals seem cold, their breath steaming. Everything as far as I can see is gray and barren, making a poor advertisement for the beauties of Minnesota on this rainy spring day. After an abrupt whoosh and lurch, we've taken off, and soon I can look down at the patchy gray and white Twin Cities area spreading out below: its familiar freeways, waterways, and bridges; woods the palest green of early buds or deep gray-green firs. Suburban rooftops and yards grow smaller as we rise and I know somewhere down there my parents sit in their living room with the TV news—the lamps going on, perhaps the microwave heating their frozen entrees—maybe imagining my plane above.

Throughout the flight back home, I'm intermittently flooded by all the images of my mom struggling. I know that she shouldn't stay in that house without more help for much longer. We didn't resolve things during our visit, but I decide I'll start actively looking for a place that could work for both of them. We need to plan for her increasing needs.

I let out a long breath, frustrated because my father wants to be in charge and doesn't feel the same urgency that I do. Mom's life is linked to his now, and typically, he hates to plan ahead, especially if it's not something he wants to do.

